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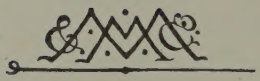

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ECCLESIASTES

OR

THE CONFESSIONS OF AN ADVENTUROUS SOUL

A PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF THE BOOK OF KOHELETH CALLED "ECCLESIASTES"

BY

MINOS DEVINE, M.A.

WORCESTER COLLEGE, OXFORD, AND ST. PETER'S, SOUTH CROYDON, SURREY

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FOREWORD

THIS book is not intended for scholars, but for the general reader. It is not a commentary, but the sympathetic study of an experience. Those who are interested in critical questions concerning this book are referred to the Appendix.

Whilst I have read these "Confessions" in the original tongue I have availed myself of the translation of the Revised Version, for which I beg to thank the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. But in a few instances I have adopted the marginal reading in preference to the text.

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I

INTRODUCTION

Does the road wind uphill all the way ?
  Yes, to the very end.
Will the day's journey take the whole long day ?
  From morn to night, my friend.

But is there for the night a resting-place ?
  A roof for when the slow dark hours begin.
May not the darkness hide it from my face ?
  You cannot miss that inn.

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI, *Uphill.*

I

IN all ages there have been thinkers who have taken life very much to heart. They have felt in different degrees, in Wordsworth's phrase—

> The heavy and the weary weight
> Of all this unintelligible world.

Their thoughts have been expressed in poetry, philosophy, and religion. Some have been crushed by this burden. It has produced the pessimist, the cynic, the misanthrope. There is a distorted type of melancholy, most sympathetic in Gautama Buddha, which has revealed itself in all the vagaries of temperament represented by such names as Lucretius, Omar Khayyám,

Montaigne, Swift, Leopardi, Schopenhauer, Heine, Thomas Hardy.

But there is another type of mind which has illustrated the greatest triumph of the spirit. Painfully conscious of the anomalies of life, and often disqualified by temperament, these sufferers have lightened the load of mankind by showing a sublime front to circumstances.

Facing all the facts of experience, refusing any sedative to thought, they have proved the power of hope and faith both to endure and enjoy life. These have been some of the world's greatest thinkers and workers, saints and prophets. The type is indicated by Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament and the Apostle Thomas in the New; and we find in the same line of succession Marcus Aurelius, Dante, Thomas à Kempis, Pascal, Michelangelo, Samuel Johnson, F. W. Robertson, Dostoievsky.

II

The book of Koheleth, commonly called Ecclesiastes, has its place in the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament with Proverbs and the book of Job. The "wise men" of Israel, though overshadowed by Prophet, Priest, and King, took their own part in the education of the chosen race. Their reputation was fully established in the time of the Prophet Jeremiah: "The law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet." [1]

This counsel of the wise was not any systematic teaching or philosophy. They did not discuss fundamental questions like the being of God, but practical claims of life and conduct. The problems of life pressed heavily upon them. Why do the innocent suffer?

[1] Jeremiah xviii. 18 (*c.* 650 B.C.).

Why is not the race to the swift and the battle to the strong? If a man die shall he live again? These and other questions taxed all the resources of faith in the reflective Jew. It cannot be denied that the "wise men" often came perilously near losing their way and confusing moral distinctions; but they were redeemed by sincerity of purpose, and a stubborn reliance upon the religious experience of the race even if it did not confirm their own. Ecclesiastes is an austere thinker among the wise men of Israel, and has exercised a peculiar fascination over those who are drawn to a man who does not prophesy smooth things. He is the first Jew, says Cheyne, who, however awkwardly, "gave his mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven." Renan thought it the only really lovable book ever written by a Jew.

III

The name Ecclesiastes is the equivalent of the Hebrew "Koheleth."[1] The word does not occur elsewhere in the Old Testament, and was evidently coined by the writer of the book. His meaning is somewhat doubtful. The writer is not so much a preacher as a reasoner, to whom years have brought "the philosophic mind." He does not speak from a pulpit, but from the common ground of experience. He has learnt in suffering what he teaches. "Perhaps the reason why the writer deliberately coined the title Koheleth was just that he might present himself, not as a preacher or prophet prepared to give authoritative deliverance on the problems of life, but rather as one who had often debated them with himself and with others."[2]

[1] See Appendix, Note B. [2] Finlayson.

This is a soul's diary, not the morbid confessions of egotism like Rousseau's *Confessions* or De Senancour's *Obermann*, but the frank story of struggle with and triumph over temperament. The writer gives us the benefit of his experience. He assumes something of the rôle of "Knowledge" in the morality of "Everyman."

> Everyman, I will go with thee, and be thy guide,
> In thy most need to go by thy side.

IV

Martin Luther was the first to discover that Solomon could not have been the author of this book. "Solomon himself has not written the book of Ecclesiastes. It was compiled by Sirach at the time of the Maccabees."[1] The authorship is undecided, but many reasons could be given which have confirmed Luther's discovery.[2]

(*a*) The book itself does not pretend to have been written by Solomon. All other reputed writings of his have his name in the inscription, *e.g.* the Proverbs of Solomon. The new impersonal name "Koheleth," a female title by which Solomon is designated in the book, shows that he is simply introduced in an ideal sense as the representative of wisdom.[3]

(*b*) The writer speaks of Solomon as belonging to the past: "I *was* king over Israel." But Solomon never had a past in which he ceased to be king. This past tense gave rise to the legend that Solomon had been dethroned.[4]

[1] *Table Talk.*

[2] Gibbon's opinion is interesting: "Ecclesiastes displays a larger compass of thought and experience than seem to belong either to a Jew or a king" (*Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. iv. p. 294 n., edited by Bury).

[3] Ginsburg, p. 245.

[4] Ginsburg.

(*c*) The state of oppression, violence, and misery depicted in this book cannot be reconciled with the worst days of the reign of Solomon.[1] The writer reflects on the government in a way no king would speak of his own administration, tracing the evil of the times to the weakness of the ruler.[2] This picture of Asiatic despotism, when the holy places were filled with unscrupulous officials, when there was no "comforter," when it was dangerous to utter one's thoughts even in the secrecy of home for fear of being overheard by the spies of tyranny,[3] is too dark to be true to the days of Solomon.

(*d*) The reference to a future bar of judgment where anomalies shall be rectified is a late development of faith which excludes the same authorship. The intimations of a future state prior to the exile are very dim. The great venture of Ecclesiastes, based on future judgment, is in agreement with the larger hope which inspired post-exilic writers.[4]

(*e*) The strongest argument, however, against the Solomonic authorship is the language and style. The book contains numerous words which are found only in later Hebrew literature. It abounds in expressions which have no parallel in other portions of Scripture. It belongs to the latest stage of linguistic development in the Old Testament.[5] "If the book of Koheleth were of Solomonic origin," says the conservative Delitzsch,[6] "there is no history of the Hebrew language." "We could as easily believe," says Ginsburg,[7] "that Chaucer is the author of *Rasselas* as that Solomon wrote

[1] See especially chaps. iv., v., x.
[2] Chap. x. 5.
[3] Chap. x. 20.
[4] See Ecclesiastes xii., Daniel xii. 2, 2 Maccabees vii.
[5] Barton, *International Critical Commentary.*
[6] *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, Introduction.
[7] *Ibid.*

Koheleth." According to the last authority it is the last written work in the canon of the Old Testament.

On these and other grounds it is generally decided that Solomon was not the author of this book. It was not, probably, written before the latter end of the time when Palestine was under the Persian yoke (350 B.C.).[1] The writer may have been a contemporary of Malachi, but those who trace Greek influences in this book accept it as the work of an unknown writer living about 200 B.C.

V

How can we explain the use of Solomon's name in the book ?

(*a*) We must remember that the canon of Scripture had closed in the law of Nehemiah's time (432 B.C.). No one who wrote under his own name after that could expect a hearing unless he were in harmony with the law or came under the protection of certain great historic names. Now the orthodox dogma of Judaism was this : every man is recompensed in this life in strict proportion to his deserts. The outward fortune is an index to the inner spiritual life. The days came when they no longer said, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." The popular rendering of the law of heredity gave place to the law of individual retribution. "Every man shall die for his own iniquity."[2] A man's life on earth is shaped by his own will and standing before God.[3] This dogma was challenged in

[1] The date of the book of Ecclesiastes remains undecided. See discussion of date, Barton *Ecclesiastes*, *International Commentary*. The period from 350 to 150 B.C. may be called the dark age of Jewish history, and some time in the course of it Ecclesiastes was written (Davidson).

[2] Jeremiah xxxi. 30.

[3] Charles, *Eschatology*, chap. ii.

the books of Job and Ecclesiastes.[1] The sufferings of Job led him to look more narrowly at the course of Providence in the world, and he failed to perceive that inseparable connection between sin and suffering insisted on by his friends. Terribly perplexed, yet protesting his innocence before heaven, he wrestles with his problem, rising to the lofty hope of vindication in a life beyond the grave.[2] The author of the book of Ecclesiastes lived in a later day. The problem is darker still: to an earnest man with a melancholy temperament the world seemed to be out of joint. He will not accept a comfortable theory of Providence. Less daring than Job in the venture of faith, he is equally devoted to the quest of truth, and rises above a pessimistic conclusion by an appeal to a higher wisdom than his own.

(*b*) The Hebrew writer was almost wholly devoid of literary pride, and did not write for fame. He was sublimely free from "the last infirmity of noble minds." His ambition was solely the service of God and the well-being of the nation. This explains much of the anonymous in the Old Testament. Hebrew history was, as a rule, anonymous. No Hebrew historian thought of himself as possessing a right of property in his work, though in the art of narrative, as such, he has probably had no ancient or modern superior.[3] There is a notable absence of self-consciousness on the subject of authorship which is wanting in writers outside the Bible canon. This is a real distinction between Ecclesiastes and the Apocryphal Ecclesiasticus.[4]

(*c*) The author of Ecclesiastes had no doubt deeper

[1] Davidson's *Job*, Introduction; Job xix. 25, 37.
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] Sanday, *Inspiration*, Lecture III.
[4] *Ibid.* Lecture V.

reason for remaining in obscurity. He could not accept the smooth conventional explanation of the anomalies of life, and yet he had a message to his fellow-men. How could he give it in a form which would make it acceptable? There is no evidence that the author wished his contemporaries to believe that his book was an ancient document written by Solomon. Ecclesiastes was not a Chatterton, tempted, for literary purposes, to write in archaic language. If he had been, he would have taken pains to choose a style belonging to Solomon's age and to avoid words of later date. But he wrote in the language of his own time. His contemporaries would recognise that the introduction of the name of Solomon was a literary choice. He wrote the book in dramatic form, impersonating a king whose name was a synonym for wisdom, yet overshadowed by follies. By putting his utterances into the mouth of Solomon he would convey the idea to his readers: "This is how I conceive Solomon himself might have spoken if he had left behind him the record of his personal experience. He was a great and wise king. He had at different times looked out upon the world with the eye of the saint, the philosopher, the sensualist. And this is how I think he might have spoken if, as a wise and thoughtful man, he had given us the result of his study, observation, and experience."[1] The message went home. But, in spite of having the name of the first and greatest of his class, it was a long time before the book gained assured recognition. The question of authorship hardly arose. The fact that it bore Solomon's name seems to have had the effect of gaining for it a hearing, and then to have dropped entirely into the background. It secured its

[1] Finlayson. Introduction.

place in the Bible, on its own merits, only after a long period of suspicion and dispute.[1]

VI

We shall miss much of the charm of this book if we regard it as a systematic treatise or a closely reasoned logical argument. The author does not advance by any definite steps towards the final solution of his problem. This is no abstract discussion of the "chief good" of life.[2] The course of the argument is strangely erratic. The literary form of the book cannot conceal a heart throbbing with emotion, a mind inspired with a great purpose. The book is not so much a work of imagination as a precious fragment of autobiography.[3] A writer sometimes feels that he can record with greater freedom his own experiences when he can put them into the lips of some other person. Plato speaks to us through Socrates, and a German professor was the mouthpiece of Thomas Carlyle. Just as we listen to Plato in the Socratic dialogues, and recognise Carlyle behind the spectacles of Professor Teufelsdröckh in *Sartor Resartus*, so we discern the features of the pensive Jew in the dramatic garb of Solomon.[4] This is the diary of an adventurous soul. With exceptional opportunities for testing the worth of life, he was able to indulge without stint in every kind of pleasure. With a student's tastes he had weighed in the balance the claims of rival schools

[1] Sanday, *Inspiration*, Lecture IV. "The dispute as to Esther and Koheleth lasted longest," p. 97. See Appendix, Note C.

[2] Though Ginsburg and Cox took that view of it in their valuable commentaries.

[3] Finlayson. Introduction.

[4] Koheleth finds it difficult to wear consistently his Solomonic disguise, *e.g.* he slips into the expression "*all* that were before me over Jerusalem," which could only refer to two, David and Saul.

of philosophy, and made many attempts to discover that surplus of "profit" which rewards the expenditure of thought and feeling. He wandered far and wide from the simple faith of Israel in quest of something better, and gradually retraced his steps, "a sadder, wiser man." The wild and hasty words often wrung from him should be read in the light of the ultimate conclusion which redeems a chequered experience.[1]

VII

I have endeavoured to resist the "clerical" temptation to make Ecclesiastes think and talk like a Christian. Cheyne seems to regard the absence of Christianity in Koheleth as a reason for complaint. "He was prosaic and unimaginative, and it is partly because there is so little poetry in Ecclesiastes that there is so little Christianity." [2] Christian interpreters have often made the same mistake as those Jewish commentators who extracted meanings from this book more ingenious than luminous. It is better to let Ecclesiastes speak for himself. The best ideas to be found here very dimly anticipate Christian teaching, but they have a value of their own, and they belong to all time. "It is possible to go down to the grave without a smile; it is possible not to shake off the burden of the mystery in all its oppressive weight to the end; and yet, provided there be no tampering with conscience and with primary truth, to be held worthy to help and teach those who have a like experience." [3]

My aim has been to apply the practical teaching of the book to conscience in daily life. The permanent

[1] Chaps. xii., xiii. [2] *Job and Solomon*, p. 247.
[3] Sanday, *Inspiration*.

value of the book depends upon the way we read it as confirmed, modified, and supplemented by the higher Christian revelation. I have tried to interpret the experiences of Ecclesiastes for the sake of "the way-faring man," perplexed, doubting, inquiring, in the hope that he, too, may find that

> Power was with him in the night,
> Which makes the darkness and the light,
> And dwells not in the light alone.

II

UNDER A CLOUD

We cannot kindle when we will
The fire which in the soul resides;
The spirit bloweth and is still,
In mystery our soul abides.
But tasks in hours of insight willed
Can be thro' hours of gloom fulfilled.

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

Chapter I. *verses* 1-11.—Words of Koheleth, son of David, King in Jerusalem. Vanity of vanities, saith Koheleth, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man in all his labour wherein he laboureth under the sun? One generation goeth, and another generation cometh: and the earth abideth for ever. The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down and hasteth to his place where he ariseth. The wind goeth towards the south, and turneth about to the north; it turneth about continually in its course, and the wind returneth again to its circuits. All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full; unto the place whither the rivers go thither they flow again. All things are full of weariness; man cannot utter it: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. That which hath been is that which shall be; and that which hath been done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun. Is there a thing whereof men may say, See, this is new? It hath been already in the ages which were before us. There is no remembrance of the former generations; neither shall there be any remembrance of the latter generations that are to come among those that shall come after.

THERE are two books which stand at opposite extremes in the Old Testament: The Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes. The old Rabbis used to shake their heads at the Song of Songs. It was too human and happy, too exuberant with the joy of life to suit their sober theology. They only allowed that love story in the Bible on one condition. All human passion must be ignored. It must be spiritualised as a mystic parable of the love of God, just as later on it became Christianised as an allegory of the love of Christ for the Church. The Book of Ecclesiastes was the other extreme. It was equally objectionable, because it reflected the heart of man as a chaos of gloom, and told the truth without gloss or apology. So Ecclesiastes has been baptized both as an orthodox Jew and a devout Christian. He was neither. He was a man with a melancholy bias recording his experience. On a broad view of inspiration we see that there is room in the Bible for all phases of life. The Bible is a living book, because it is so true to life. I am not surprised to find in it both a song of songs and a sigh of sighs. Men cry to God in many languages, and God hears and understands.

> If I stoop
> Into a dark tremendous sea of cloud,
> It is but for a time; I press God's lamp
> Close to my breast; its splendour, soon or late,
> Will pierce the gloom.[1]

I

"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." This is one of the key-notes of the book repeated about forty times. There is some monotone running through most lives,

[1] Robert Browning, *Paracelsus.*

and when it is in the minor key the effect is somewhat depressing. If you can realise what a trial it is to be told forty times that "all is vanity," you may be disposed to exercise some restraint in the repetition of any one idea, however interesting it may be to yourself. We find the equivalent to the word "vanity" in the vocabulary of the Apostle James. "What is your life? It is even a vapour (vanity) that appeareth for a little while and then vanisheth away."[1] And that was one of the favourite texts of John Ruskin. Three men looked at a cloud. "Vapour of vapours, all is vapour," cried Ecclesiastes. Life is shadowy, unsubstantial; there is no permanence in anything. "Therefore," cried the Apostle James, "boast not thyself of to-morrow." "I suppose," said Ruskin, "few people reach the middle or latter part of their age without having felt the truth of these bitter words . . . the fabric of life is as fragile as a dream and the endurance of it as transient as the dew."[2] Ecclesiastes lived "under a cloud." We need to understand the man and the times in which he lived to understand his book. "The book, if you would see anything in it, requires to be read in the twilight atmosphere in which it was written. If opened in the sunshine it is apt to look exceedingly like a volume of blank pages."[3] Such was the appeal Nathaniel Hawthorne once made to his readers. We need

[1] James iv. 14.

[2] Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, iii., "The Mystery of Life." And read Gibbon's description of Gelimer, the Vandal king, led in chains in the triumph of Belisarius: "He was clad in a purple robe, and still maintained the majesty of a king; not a tear escaped from his eyes, not a sigh was heard; but his pride or piety derived some secret consolation from the words which he repeatedly pronounced, 'Vanity! vanity! all is vanity'" (*Decline and Fall*, vol. iv. p. 294, edited by Bury).

[3] *Twice-told Tales*, Preface.

the same sympathy, the same "twilight," in reading Ecclesiastes.

II

How can we account for the subdued light in this book? [1]

(*a*) By the temperament of the author. He was one who took life very much to heart, no doubt with a tendency to dwell on the darker side. With leisure to think and brood he was much at the mercy of temperament, yet fearless in following truth through all the tortuous mazes of discovery. In his love of truth he had something of the desperate faith of one who cried, "Though He slay me, yet will I wait for Him." [2] He might have said with the grim resignation of an Apostle, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him." [3]

(*b*) Ecclesiastes has a deficient knowledge of God. The sense of a Being, in touch with the world, admitting men to fellowship and redeeming him from trouble, has faded. He clings to belief in God,[4] but the sacred name, with all its rich associations, which recalls the ancestral faith of Israel, is never used.[5] He is Creator,[6] not Father or Saviour—His character austere, His rule despotic, His purposes inscrutable. This explains much of the lonely bewilderment of Ecclesiastes. According to "The Universal Prayer," the differences in the name of God signify nothing.

[1] Cheyne reminds us that none of the ancient peoples were naturally less inclined to pessimism than the Jews (*Job and Solomon*, p. 253).

[2] Job xiii. 15 (R.V.).

[3] John xi. 16.

[4] Elohim.

[5] Yahweh (Jehovah). For the meaning of the names of God see Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible*. Elohim expresses the general notion of Divine majesty. Yahweh expresses the idea of all that God "will be" to His people.

[6] Chap. xii. 1.

Father of All! in every age,
In every clime ador'd,
By saint, by savage, and by sage,
Jehovah, Jove, or Lord.[1]

To say that it matters not whether God be called "Jehovah, Jove, or Lord" is true if it means that an earnest heart is accepted by the "Father of All" by whatever name He may be addressed. But this cannot mean that Jove and Jehovah express the same idea of God. "The highest demand of religion is this: Tell me, I pray Thee, Thy Name![2] Shall we say It or He? What is It? Who is He? These anticipations of immortality and God—what are they . . . the sound of our own wishes echoing through the vast void of Nothingness, or shall I call them God, Father, Spirit, Love? . . . Tell me Thy Name, Thou awful mystery of loveliness! This is the struggle of all earnest life."[3] Before Christ came and proved in His own Person that the Divine Being was not only Infinite but also Personal, it was inevitable that all religious thought which was unrestrained by orthodoxy and ancient tradition should tend towards Pantheism and its necessary corollary Fatalism. Before Christ rose from the dead and proved in His own Person the certainty of a "hereafter," it was inevitable that the key to life's problems not yet being found, all knowledge should be only a "perhaps."[4]

(*c*) This thinker has the precarious hope of a future life common to most Hebrew thought. It is "an undiscovered country," and looms before his imagination as a dark, cheerless prospect. Flashes of intuition play like lightning about the "cloud," but cannot pierce it.

[1] Pope.
[2] Genesis xxxii.
[3] F. W. Robertson, *Jacob's Wrestling.*
[4] M'Neile.

He makes a great advance in faith by fixing his eye on a day of judgment,[1] but it gives him little joy. He lacks the vision of Job and cannot make his magnificent venture: "Without my flesh, I shall see God."[2] Though he clings to the facts that God is a righteous Judge and His dealings with men obviously incomplete—though he stubbornly believes that these two facts are capable of some reconciliation in another life, the book is full of inconsistencies. Swayed by his mood, at one time death appears better than life, and at another time "a living dog" appears "better than a dead lion."[3]

(*d*) The book is deeply affected by its social background. Ecclesiastes speaks bitterly of the oppression of the poor and the perversion of justice. It was one of those periods when the foundations of faith in God and man are shaken. Asiatic or Greek despotism cast a blight on social life. The age of Solomon was not that age of ideal social happiness it is sometimes represented to have been. Those "good old times" had many intolerable grievances.[4] But the worst abuses of Solomon's power were not to be compared with the troubles of later days. "Folly is set in great dignity, but the nobles dwell in low estate. Servants ride upon horses and princes walk as servants."[5] The spies of tyranny penetrated into the privacy of the home.[6] The fabric of the State was undermined and demoralised by a government regardless of duty and the sufferings of the people. Against such evils the writer felt himself

[1] See Appendix on "Judgment," Note E.

[2] Job xix. 25 (R.V.). But see Job in another mood, and his dreary description of Sheol, Job x. 21, 22.

[3] Chap. ix. 4.

[4] See Kent, *A History of the Hebrew People*, Part III. chap. xii.

[5] Ecclesiastes x. 7. [6] Chap. x. 20.

impotent. He was a member of a subject race. Even his own people were probably disunited in sentiment and aim. Mankind seemed to him like a heap of atoms, without coherence, with no destiny, like fishes of the sea which are taken in an evil net (ix. 2). A hopeless individualism met him everywhere.[1] These signs of the times would intensify the melancholy bias of Ecclesiastes. The logic of melancholy leaps to conclusions. It is easy to think that because the times are evil we can only find a shifting faith in any moral government of the world.[2]

III

The book opens with a sad soliloquy. "What profit hath a man in all his labour which he laboureth under the sun?" It is in the form of a commercial question. Ecclesiastes looks at the balance-sheet of life, studies profit and loss, and the result is disappointing. Is it worth the expenditure of thought and energy and pain? Does he receive "the wages of going on"? Is life worth living? The man is in that mood when all the uses of the world seem "stale, flat and unprofitable." How monotonous life is![3] "Men may come and men may go," but the earth abideth for ever. The sun rises and sets, and rises again day after day. The wind may seem to be capricious, now in the north and now in the

[1] Davidson, *Book by Book*, p. 189.

[2] Cheyne compares Ecclesiastes to Turgenieff, whom he calls "the Ecclesiastes of the Slav race." Ecclesiastes seems to despair of the future, but only perhaps of the immediate future, and Turgenieff does this too (*Job and Solomon*, chap. vii.).

[3] Carlyle has finely applied this imagery in *Sartor Resarteus*: "Generations are as the Days of toilsome Mankind: Death and Birth are the vesper and the matin-bells, that summon mankind to sleep, and to rise refreshed for new advancement."

south, but really, it has very little variation. All the streams run into the sea, and have run for ages, yet the sea is not full. Wherever you look, you see the same things, you hear the same tale. "That which hath been is that which shall be." History is always repeating itself. "Is there anything whereof it may be said, See, this is new," he cries, with the longing of a jaded palate for something to tickle the appetite, with that touch of nature which made him kin to those Athenians who spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing. But with far deeper insight than those degenerate philosophers, Ecclesiastes was not deceived by the appearance of novelty. He saw far better than many of us to-day that the "new things" which delight us are as old as the hills—"it hath been already in the ages which were before us." He drinks the bitter cup to the dregs. "There is no remembrance of former generations," and the same sea of oblivion shall wash away all memory of the present. Is life worth living? Ecclesiastes does not ask the ever-recurring question in a flippant spirit, but with all the gravity of a man who seeks an object in life. He has picked up a commercial term, but he does not use it in a commercial spirit. He is not "greedy for quick returns of profit." He is not seeking pleasure or ease. What makes life worth living?

The wages of sin is death: if the wages of Virtue be dust,
Would she have heart to endure for the life of the worm and the fly?
She desires no isles of the blest, no quiet seats of the just,
To rest in a golden grove, or to bask in a summer sky:
Give her the wages of going on, and not to die.

[1] Tennyson, "Wages."

IV

Ecclesiastes touches deep chords in our nature. There is a feeling of emptiness in our modern life which all our rapid pace in the pursuit of pleasure cannot alleviate.

> We look before and after,
> And pine for what is not:
> Our sincerest laughter
> With some pain is fraught;
> Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.[1]

Even the saintly Eugénie de Guérin, living under ideal conditions of nature, could write: "Oh! the ennui, the most deadly inveterate settled ennui that comes in by one door when it is chased out of another." [2] We do everything inventiveness can suggest to escape. We seize upon novelties with avidity, only to find that they taste very much like something we have had before. And this produces a melancholy mood, which betrays itself by recklessness or a grim resignation to the inevitable. Yet this mood may be a way to God. When we are "under a cloud," when we have no light on our way, then we may remember "God's lamp" of revelation, "whose splendour soon or late will pierce the gloom." [3]

It has been said, "Life is a comedy to those who think, a tragedy to those who feel." This conviction of "vanity" may produce cynicism, or a practice of turning away from the world to find satisfaction in the unseen, or a heroism which, facing all the facts of life,

[1] Shelley, "To a Skylark." [2] *Journal*, chap. viii.
[3] Read chap. xxv. of *Lavengro* (George Borrow).

feels deeply and thinks hopefully. We find representatives of these three results in such types as Thomas à Kempis, Montaigne, and Pascal.

(*a*) Over the porch of that cloister *The Imitation of Christ* is written: "Vanity of vanities, and all is vanity except to love God and to serve Him only." [1] Thomas à Kempis was a Christian Ecclesiastes.[2] His sensitive soul felt deeply the tragedy of his time. The beginning of the fifteenth century was a period of political anarchy and ecclesiastical shame, of war, famine, corruption, and misery. Thomas entered a monastery at the age of twenty-one, and there spent seventy-one years in calm communion with God, untroubled by the raging storm without. His imperishable book tells us the secret of his rest. It will be read as long as we crave for consolation and peace. Yet we know all the time that this man did not live in our world. Monasticism often shirked the real problem of life. The monk retired from the real battle of life, and we cannot follow him without surrendering our birthright as citizens, without renouncing the hope of that victory which overcometh the world.

(*b*) Few men have understood the "vanity" of life without thinking deeply, as did Michel de Montaigne.[3] With his knowledge of the world and cynical, easy-going philosophy, he represents the pagan Ecclesiastes. A strange inscription in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey might appropriately apply to him:

> Life is a jest and all things shew it;
> I thought so once and now I know it.[4]

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[1] Book I. chap. i.

[2] See also Jeremy Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*, chap i. sec. 3. Cheyne says: "Parts of this chapter remind us strongly of Koheleth, and are strange indeed in a book of Christian devotion."

[3] *Montaigne*, Edith Sichel.

[4] Inscription on the tomb of Gay.

Without the earnestness of the Jew or the sincerity of the Christian, yet like both, Montaigne was moody and solitary. "We put out our arms to embrace everything, but we only clasp the wind," sums up his philosophy. He retires as much as possible from exposure to the gusts of wind and the society of his fellow-men. In the seclusion of his tower, where he loved to be alone, the Frenchman was as much aloof from the world as the monk. Montaigne talks to us like a man who has long ago given up the search for truth. The soul's awakening of the sixteenth century did not disturb him. The times are evil, but who knows of any surgery that could put them right? He distrusts the Reformation and sneers at the translation of the Bible.[1] The hidden values of life, of enthusiasm, of light and truth are all unknown to this philosopher with a cheap estimate of human experience.

(*c*) Pascal read the same facts which depressed Ecclesiastes and soured Montaigne. A man of feeling and a profound thinker, he shared the common experience, whilst with rare insight he explored the realms of knowledge. "Ecclesiastes shows," he says, "that man without God is in total ignorance and inevitable misery."[2] Yet man, ignorant and miserable, is not to be despised. The commonplaces of sin and sorrow are the meeting-places of God and man. Pascal had groped and stumbled among the shifting sands of thought, but he pressed God's lamps of revelation close to his breast, and its splendour cast new light on the pathos of life. "The wretchedness of man is the wretchedness of a king—dethroned and disinherited. Who is unhappy

[1] *Essays*, Book I. 56, "Of Praiers and Orisons."
[2] *Thoughts*, 389.

at not being a king except a deposed king ?[1] Pascal learnt the secret of man's origin and destiny in the Christian revelation. "Christianity is strange. It bids man recognise that he is vile, and bids him desire to be like God."[2] This was the final answer to human philosophy in all its moods. "The Stoics say, 'Retire within yourselves—it is there you will find your rest.' And that is not true. Others say, 'Go out of yourselves; seek happiness in amusement.' And this is not true. Happiness is neither without us nor within us. It is in God, both without us and within us."[3]

Pascal cries out to ancient and modern philosophy: "See, this is new! The thought in God's breast is ever the same, but revelation is new." God, who spake in times past to the fathers by prophet, priest, philosopher, and king, hath in these last days spoken to us by His Son.[4] Physical science emphasises the thought of the absolute sameness and continuous repetition of the past and future, and yet it is possible to escape from the treadmill, make to-morrow not as yesterday, and begin life afresh. How can these things be? How can a man be born when he is old?[5] "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh or whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit." "If any man be in Christ Jesus he is a new creature: old things are passed away, behold! all things become new."[6]

[1] *Thoughts*, 398, 409. [2] *Ibid.* 537. [3] *Ibid.* 465.
[4] Hebrews i. 1. [5] John iii. [6] 2 Corinthians v. 17.

III

UNDER THE SUN

Sad were we
In the sweet air, by the sun made glad.
DANTE, *Inf.* vii.

I feel the earth move sunward,
I join the great march onward,
And take, by faith, while living,
My freehold of thanksgiving.
WHITTIER, *My Triumph.*

ANOTHER characteristic monotone in this book is the phrase "under the sun."[1] Many never discover the sun shining behind the cloud in Ecclesiastes. If you make up your mind about a man's character, it is easy to believe that everything you hear of him confirms your conclusion. The same is true of a book. A prevalent opinion of Ecclesiastes is that he was a disappointed man and a confirmed pessimist. We read his book with that bias, and our judgment seems confirmed. If, now and then, we hear the language of faith and hope, we explain this in some way which does not disturb our

[1] The phrase occurs twenty-nine times in Koheleth and not elsewhere in the Old Testament. Our word "sublunary" conveys an analogous idea, but I have ventured to employ the expression in a more literal way than intended by Ecclesiastes.

theory. But the last thing we are disposed to admit is that Ecclesiastes can teach us anything. Let us look at the silver lining of "the cloud."

I

(*a*) Oliver Wendell Holmes once asked, "Why can't somebody give me a list of things that everybody thinks and nobody says, and another list of things everybody says and nobody thinks?"[1] It was an appeal for sincerity, for clearing the mind of cant. I do not know any writer who achieves this better than Ecclesiastes. He is fearlessly sincere. He tells you what he thinks, will not say, "Peace, Peace," when there is no peace. He looks out on the world and records, unflinchingly, what he sees. His experience may have been unfortunate—he may have fallen upon evil days. But he will not gloss over the truth, whether it is palatable or not, he will not live in a Fool's Paradise. He will know the worst you can tell him, and then build up any hope he can, in spite of it. And some of us have yet to learn to do the same thing with equal courage and consistency.

(*b*) The note of personal complaint is also conspicuously absent from this book. The writer is no doubt of a melancholy cast of mind. He sees, perhaps, the shadows of coming events before any one else. He chooses to go to the house of mourning rather than to the house of feasting. But he is no timid querulous soul. He has had many griefs, but he will not nurse a grievance. He has suffered, but he does not think he is a martyr. There are no tears of wounded self-love. You do not find him striking tragic attitudes as though he were the hero of the "piece." He is one with his

[1] *Professor at the Breakfast-Table*, vi.

fellow-men: his problems and discoveries are common possessions. So this autobiography is quite free from that morbid self-consciousness which gives a sickly hue to so many confessions of the soul. A good deal of modern complaint is not moral, but merely personal.

(*c*) You will find hardly a trace of cynicism in this book.[1] The cynic is a man who has lost faith in God and man. He is not a man of moods, who may be tempted to say in his haste, like the Psalmist, "All men are liars." That slander is a settled conviction. Now Ecclesiastes was no doubt tempted to be cynical, and may have been more than once on the verge of it. With his knowledge of life, great and small, his genius might easily have become distorted. There *is* irony in the Bible, and no doubt in this book, but it is never used as a weapon. It is always held in restraint. It is never a stab such as it became in the hands of a man like Dean Swift. Ecclesiastes was often bewildered—reeled—staggered at the anomalies of life, but he never quite lost his balance, never quite lost the sanity of hope. The hasty things which escaped him are not ultimate conclusions.

(*d*) This man does not think he can solve his problems alone. He has no intellectual conceit. He is a teacher, but quite willing to learn. Ecclesiastes never loses touch with his fellow-men. "Two are better than one . . .; a threefold cord is not quickly broken."[2] His heart is open to all the helpful influences of friendship and sympathy. He thankfully accepts the common gifts and opportunities of life—thanks God for health and

[1] See chap. xiii., the triumph over cynicism.
[2] Chap. iv.

work and sleep. He will not allow his hand to lose its cunning because he is at his wits' end. He does with his might what his hand finds to do. If he is poor in spiritual possessions, he can always afford to be generous. Never shut up within the limits of a narrow prudential philosophy, he "casts his bread upon the waters" with a liberal hand, rejecting with heavenly disdain

> the lore
> Of nicely calculated less and more.

(*e*) Ecclesiastes bravely refused to be resigned to the tyranny of temperament. The melancholy man is always in danger of missing any good which redeems the ills of life. He is the last person naturally disposed to distil that "soul of goodness" which lurks even in evil. This book is a story of triumph over temperament. Tempted to find consolation in the Epicurean maxim,[1] "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die," this man finds pleasure in work, in the cheerful enjoyment of simple common blessings.

There is an unmistakable note of joy in all the "still sad music" of this book. "There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink and make his soul enjoy good in his labour. It is the gift of God." [2] "Every man also to whom God hath given riches and wealth, and hath given him power to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour; this is the gift of God." [3] "God makes him to sing in the joy

[1] Milton seems to have thought that he succumbed to this temptation. "The Bible brings in holiest men passionately murmuring against Providence through all the arguments of Epicurus" (*Areopagitica*, John Milton's Prose Works, vol. ii. p. 69). But M'Neile says: "It is exceedingly difficult to find the slightest trace of Epicureanism in the book" (Introduction, p. 53).

[2] Ecclesiastes ii. 24.

[3] Ecclesiastes v. 19, 20.

of his heart." [1] "Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart, for already God has accepted thy works . . . enjoy life with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity." [2] "Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth." [3]

II

Ecclesiastes saw a silver lining to the cloud, because amidst all the anomalies of life he clung to the belief in a moral government of the world.

(*a*) There is a reverent recognition of God in this book. The name of God occurs nearly forty times. He may have lost the child heart of Israel, the joy of the Psalmists, the passion of the prophets, and God may seem far, far away. But we find him kneeling at the "altar stairs, which slope through darkness up to God." [4] Is it an altar to "The Unknown God"? Those who date this book in the later Greek period (250 B.C.) trace the influence of both Stoic and Epicurean philosophy.[5] Even if this were admitted, it would still be easy to prove that the conception of God in Ecclesiastes is as far removed from the dumb Fate of Zeno as the impersonal Nature of Epicurus.[6] All we can say is, "As a thinking Jew he had the makings of a Greek philosopher." [7] This man has been educated in the school of Hebrew piety, however far he may have wandered from the simplicity of his childhood. He

[1] Ecclesiastes v. 20. [2] Ecclesiastes ix. 7.
[3] Ecclesiastes xi. 9.
[4] See Chap. IX. in this book, "Worship."
[5] See Tyler and Plumptre.
[6] See W. L. Davidson, *Stoic Creed*, and Barton, *Ecclesiastes, Relation of Koheleth to Greek Thought.* [7] M'Neile, p. 44.

might have said, in the sad, reminiscent mood of our humorist:

> I remember, I remember
> The fir-trees dark and high;
> I used to think their slender tops
> Were close against the sky.
> It was a childish ignorance,
> But now 'tis little joy
> To know I'm farther off from Heaven
> Than when I was a boy.[1]

Yet he still looks up. His ignorance is profound. "I beheld all the work of God, that a man cannot find it out." [2] Yet, he knows that God is Creator and will bring every work into judgment.[3] Though everything seems out of the perpendicular, he falls back upon revelation: "Lo! this have I found, that God hath made man upright." [4] Life is His gift. There is a Divine order discernible in all the disorder of the world: "God has made everything beautiful in its time." [5] He has endowed every soul with a sense of the everlasting: "Thou hast set eternity in the heart." [6] These gleams of light inspire Ecclesiastes with a true reverence for God.

(*b*) This reverence was sustained by respect for a habit of childhood. Amid all his perplexities he kept his place in the house of God.[7] He never thought that he would solve his problems outside that religious world where, if anywhere, God had revealed Himself to man. He is a worshipper, and he does not worship alone. He may have no heart to sing the songs of Zion. Seeing everything in "a dim, religious light," much of the

[1] Hood. [2] viii. 17. [3] xii.
[4] vii. 29. [5] iii. 11. [6] iii. 11.
[7] Ecclesiastes v., Chap. IX. in this book.

beauty of the ancestral worship would be lost upon him. But he keeps his place in the house of God, keeps his heart open to the light, and never ceases to pray, "Oh, that I knew where I might find Him!"

(*c*) The sincerity, the moral aim, the triumph over temperament, the deep feeling and reverence of Ecclesiastes resulted in a happy conclusion.[1] "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning." This is not "a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." He does not morbidly ramble over life without making progress like so many excursions of thought when we arrive at our starting-place. "Much that is spoken in the earlier portion of the book is spoken in order to be confuted, and its insufficiency, its exaggerations, its one-sidedness, and its half-truths are manifest in the light of the ultimate conclusion. Through all these perplexities he goes on 'sounding his dim and perilous way,' with pitfalls on this side of him and bogs on that, till he comes out at last upon the open way, with firm ground under foot and a clear sky overhead."[2] This is a tale of Pilgrim's Progress.

III

Ecclesiastes has been compared to the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*.[3] No doubt there are affinities of temperament and mood. There is the same sense of the illusiveness of life, of the "shallows and miseries" left by the ebbing tide of existence. But the Persian never rises above himself. He has lost faith in the God of his fathers, and has no real clue to the mystery of life.

[1] Chap. xii. 13. See arguments for accepting Epilogue as original part of the book, Appendix, Note I.

[2] A. Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*.

[3] Edward FitzGerald's version.

He never sees the rainbow through the rain. He drugs his mind that he may escape from thinking, and revels in the present that he may forget the past. His music is an exquisite setting to the conclusions of the Epicurean and the cynic.

There is a far truer parallel with Ecclesiastes in the "Two Voices" of Tennyson. In that poem we see despair and hope audibly wrestling with the problems of life. "When I wrote that poem," confessed Tennyson, "I was so utterly miserable—a burden to myself and my family—that I said, 'Is life worth living?'" [1] We have heard Ecclesiastes ask the same question. Both grappled with it.

> They fought their doubts and gathered strength,
> They would not make their judgment blind,
> They faced the spectres of the mind
> And laid them.

With both, faith at length prevailed over experience. The last word of Hebrew thinker and English poet is the same: Rejoice!

"Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments: for this is the whole (duty) of man." Such is the triumph of Ecclesiastes. "To probe to the bottom the misery of the world, to find nothing but chaos and unsolved enigmas, to follow the logic of thought wherever it leads, and yet suddenly to stop short of the obvious conclusion that there is no God and no moral government of the world at all, but instead, to fall back on the simple, plain duties of religion," [2] this is the victory which has installed Ecclesiastes to a niche in our admiration and love.

[1] *Tennyson, Memoir*, by his Son, vol. i. chap. viii.
[2] Sanday, *Inspiration*.

IV

It has been said, "No truth is established till it has been denied and has survived."[1] If this man came back to the simple faith of Israel, it was infinitely more to him than when he had first accepted it as the faith of his fathers. Before this conclusion became established, it had been denied by every doubt which perplexity and unbelief can originate. It survived all shocks of failure and disappointment. The conclusion is not a mere repetition of a creed or a shibboleth.

> In many a subtle question versed
> He touch'd a jarring lyre at first
> But ever strove to make it true:
>
> Perplext in faith, but pure in deeds,
> At last, he beat his music out.

And it harmonised with the strains of the sweet Psalmist of Israel.

Ecclesiastes is the prodigal son of the Old Testament. With a bold adventurous spirit he claimed the portion of life which belonged to him. Leaving the shelter of the ancestral roof, he journeyed into a "far country"—read many books, sat at the feet of many masters, saw life and death. He too, perhaps, may have "wasted his substance with riotous living." Then came the day of disenchantment. "When he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in the land, and he began to be in want." He had come to the end of his intellectual resources. Life had not fulfilled its promise. He saw

> Perpetual emptiness! unceasing change!
> No code,
> No master spirit, no determined road.[2]

[1] Maclaren. [2] Wordsworth.

The restlessness, the hunger of the heart remained. When he came to himself the vision of early days awakened his soul. He recalled the melodies of home: "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." [1] And he arose, and came to his father. The weary traveller found rest under the old roof.

. . . . . .

"The light shall not be clear nor dark . . . not day nor night; but it shall come to pass that at evening time it shall be light." [2] "'Our Father which art in Heaven. Hallowed be Thy Name. Thy will be done.' What else can we say? The other night in my sleepless tossings about, which were growing more and more miserable, these words, that brief and grand prayer, came strangely into my mind with an altogether new emphasis, as if written and shining for me in mild, pure splendour in the black bosom of the night; when I, as it were, read them word by word, with a sudden check to my imperfect wanderings. Not for perhaps thirty or forty years had I once formally repeated that Prayer." [3]

[1] See xii. 11. [2] Zechariah xiv. 6.

[3] Extract from letter Carlyle wrote to Thomas Erskine of Linlathen in 1869.

IV

EXPERIENCE

O to arrive each Monday morn from Ind!
To land each Tuesday from the rich Levant!
In little time a host of joys to bind,
And keep our souls in one eternal pant!

KEATS, *Sonnet VII. World's Classics.*

When I was a boy I used to care about pretty stones. I got some Bristol diamonds at Bristol, and some dog-tooth spar in Derbyshire; my whole collection had cost perhaps three half-crowns and was worth considerably less; and I knew nothing whatever rightly about any single stone in it; could not even spell their names: but words cannot tell the joy they used to give me. Now I have a collection of minerals worth perhaps from two to three thousand pounds; and I know more about some of them than most other people. But I am not a whit happier either for my knowledge or possessions; for other geologists dispute my theories, and I am miserable about all my best specimens because there are better in the British Museum. No, I assure you knowledge by itself will not make you happy.

RUSKIN, *Fors Clavigera*, vol. i. Letter 4.

Chapter I. *verse* 12 to Chapter II. *verse* 11.—I the Preacher was king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven: it is a sore travail that God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised therewith. I have seen all the works that are under the sun, and behold all is vanity and a striving after wind.[1] That which is crooked cannot be made straight: and that which is wanting cannot be numbered. I communed

[1] Margin, "feeding on wind."

with mine own heart, saying, Lo, I have gotten me great wisdom above all that were before me in Jerusalem: yea, my heart hath great experience of wisdom and knowledge. And I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived that this also was a striving after wind. For in much wisdom is much grief; and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.

Chapter II. *verses* 1-11.—I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure; and, behold, this also was vanity. I said of laughter, It is mad; and of mirth, What doeth it? I searched in mine heart how to cheer my flesh with wine (mine heart yet guiding me with wisdom), and how to lay hold on folly till I might see what it was good for the sons of men that they should do under the heaven all the days of their life. I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards; I made me gardens and parks, and planted trees in them of all kinds of fruit: I made me pools of water, to water therefrom the forest where trees were reared: I bought menservants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of herds and flocks above all that were before me in Jerusalem: I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces: I gat me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, concubines very many. So I was great and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me. And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them: I withheld not my heart from any joy, for my heart rejoiced because of all my labour; and this was my portion from all my labour. Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was no profit under the sun.

It is the personal element which makes this book live. Ecclesiastes has learnt many things from his close observation of life and his own mistakes. The book reads like a message of an old man to young people. He does not merely moralise or preach at us or pose as an example. He wants the next generation to live a better life than his

own. He proposes to speak in the character of Solomon, who had exceptional opportunities to make the best of life. And this is his confession: "I sought happiness apart from God and could not find it." But he does not think his life has been in vain, though it has been so full of disenchantment. The first mention of the name of God[1] indicates that there is some "rhyme and reason" in the strangest experience. This search for satisfaction is divinely ordained. "This sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith." The word "travail" is another favourite expression. What mainly strikes Ecclesiastes is the enormous amount of expenditure of effort and the tragical poverty of its results. The wearisome monotony he had noticed in Nature is paralleled by the barren results of all that is done by man under Heaven. Yet he has a glimpse of some higher purpose in it all. The thought of life as moral discipline passes through his mind. The exercise which ends in fatigue may result in strengthened muscle, braced limb, and alert soul. He has shaken himself free, or he wishes to represent a man who has shaken himself free from Revelation, and is fighting the problem of life without any help from Law or Prophet or Psalm. But he does believe in God, though his faith is what we would call to-day "pure Theism." It throws enough light on his path to suggest that our restlessness, our thirst for knowledge and life, may be part of our education in wisdom. A hard schoolmaster may sharpen our faculties, and pain may lead to the discovery of truth. He avoids the mistake of thinking that he can justify all his steps in the quest. He believes in a "Divinity shaping our ends," but he is quite free from "the excel-

[1] i. 13.

lent foppery of the world," which talks as though we were "fools by heavenly compulsion . . . and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on."[1] Ecclesiastes never confuses the distinction between right and wrong, between experience and folly, between "a man good in his sight" and "a sinner." Those who take a dark view of this book see little that redeems it from the confessions of a sensualist. It is far more the story of an intellectual nature beset with temptation, but ever seeking a key to the riddle of the Universe. It is more akin to the confessions of a Faust or a Tolstoi than a Rousseau.

I

"I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven."[2] We hear an echo of these days at the close of the book: "Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness to the flesh." The famous library at Alexandria was now accessible to the Jew. On the portal of the library at Thebes was the pretentious inscription, "The hospital of the soul." In his intellectual search the young student devoured literature. In later life he talked freely to the "physicians of the soul." He asked searching questions.

> Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,
> Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
> Raze out the written troubles of the brain

[1] *King Lear.* See also *Othello*, Iago's protest against the doctrine of fatalism: "Virtue! a fig! 'tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus," Act I. Sc. iii. "Edmund in *King Lear* and Iago, alone among the persons of the great tragedies, believe in the sufficiency of man to control his destinies" (Raleigh, *Shakespeare*, English Men of Letters, p. 203).

[2] i. 13.

> And with some sweet oblivious antidote
> Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff
> Which weighs upon the heart ? [1]

And the physicians, warily, answered :

> Therein the patient
> Must minister to himself.

Instead of finding solutions to his problems he heard complacent maxims : " That which is crooked cannot be made straight, and that which is wanting cannot be numbered." [2] He explored wider and deeper, gaining great experience in wisdom and knowledge. He became a learned man, and never lost the love of learning. He was never content with " the bliss of ignorance." To the end of his life " he taught the people knowledge." But in the acquirement of it he found no satisfaction. He can only describe his feelings by coining a new expression : " feeding upon wind." [3] George Herbert called the same experience " nothing, between two dishes." [4] You sit down to the feast of life, take the silver cover off the platter, only to find emptiness. Knowledge in itself was disappointing. No widening of the mental horizon could appease the hunger of the soul. The eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil only revealed his insufficiency to solve the problem of existence. Knowledge destroyed illusions, but made him more painfully conscious of his limitations. Brain-weary and disappointed, he tosses to and fro on the pillow of proverbial wisdom. " In much wisdom is

[1] *Macbeth.* [2] i. 15.

[3] The marginal reading of R.V. is an improvement on the text, " vexation of spirit " (A.V.). See parallel phrase, Hosea xii. 2, " Ephraim feedeth on wind."

[4] " Dotage."

much vexation, and he who increaseth knowledge increaseth pain." [1]

II

He will try another experiment. He will renounce philosophy and all its allurements, and seek peace in the pursuit of pleasure. The choice of a Faust, the fall of an Abelard, may illustrate his experience. With his eyes open he lived as other men lived—laughed and found the world laughing with him. But pleasures soon palled. The doom of "vanity" was on them all. He resorts to stimulants, "giving himself unto wine," but, with characteristic caution, never loses self-control. He restrains the lower nature with bit and bridle, "yet guiding my heart in wisdom." There is an element of refinement in all his enjoyment. He builds a Palace—

> a lordly pleasure-house,
> Wherein at ease for aye to dwell.
> I said, "O Soul, make merry and carouse,
> Dear soul, for all is well."
> . . . . . .
> Full of great rooms and small the palace stood,
> All various, each a perfect whole
> From living Nature, fit for every mood
> And change of my still soul.[2]

But the palace of beauty fails to charm. No tenant comes to occupy the vacancy of the soul. The wanderer dwells in an empty house; this restless spirit seeks rest and finds none, and the seven devils which haunt loneliness claim possession. The last state of this man is worse than the first. He wanders alone through his parks, with flowing streams and shady groves, through gardens "planted with pomegranates, spikenards and

[1] i. 18. [2] Tennyson, "The Palace of Art."

camphire, calamus and cinnamon, frankincense and lilies." [1] Surrounded with all the tokens of wealth which appeal to the Oriental imagination, slaves and musicians, flocks and herds, gold from Ophir, balm from Gilead, precious treasure from Arabia, he can say, "So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me." [2] He was not deceived by the glamour of it all. Whilst he gratified the higher and lower passions, he was never a slave to them. Like Faust, he was experimenting with life, analysing his emotions, studying himself. And what was the result? The same as before. The pursuit of beauty, the gratification of sensual pleasure, was as unsatisfying as the pursuit of knowledge: "behold, all was vanity, and feeding on wind, and there was no profit under the sun." [3] The judgment of Ecclesiastes is not distorted by these experiences. He does not condemn pleasure, and reminds us, later on, that there is a time to laugh and a time to dance. He never lost the zest for learning, the keen relish of life. But he confesses that when pleasure became an absorbing pursuit it ceased to serve a legitimate purpose, and even the higher forms of pleasure, the love of beauty and knowledge, failed to satisfy the yearnings of the soul. This man knew what life could give before he spoke of its emptiness. The grapes were not beyond his reach. They were not sour but sweet. He had grasped and tasted them to the full. But they did not satisfy.

This fragment of autobiography, with its dreary conclusion, is only redeemed by the thought of God. On looking back on his life he can see some Divine purpose running through it all. This is as an anchor to

[1] See Song of Solomon, iv. [2] ii. 9. [3] ii. 11.

his soul. It keeps him from drifting into cynicism. If the "sore travail" of life be of Divine appointment it cannot be profitless, however poor the immediate returns might be.

III

The modern man makes the same confession as Ecclesiastes. Tolstoi had much of the temperament and outlook of the Jew. *My Confession* is the most human of commentaries on this phase of his experience. "There is an old Eastern fable about a traveller in the steppes who is attacked by a wild beast. To save himself, the traveller gets into a dried-up well; but at the bottom of it he sees a dragon with its jaws wide open to devour him. The unhappy man dares not get out for fear of the wild beast, and dares not descend for fear of the dragon, so he catches hold of the branch of a wild plant growing in a crevice of the well. His arms grow tired, and he feels that he must soon perish, death awaiting him on either side, but he still holds on. And then he sees two mice, one black and one white, gnawing through the trunk of the wild plant. The plant must soon give way, and he will fall into the jaws of the dragon. The traveller sees them and knows that he must inevitably perish; but while still hanging, he looks around him and, finding some drops of honey on the leaves of the wild plant, he stretches out his tongue and licks them." [1]

"This is no fable," says Tolstoi, "but a living, undeniable truth. Thus do I cling to the branch of life. I strive to suck the honey which once comforted me, but it palls on my palate, whilst the white mouse and the black (day and night) gnaw the branch to which I cling.

[1] Tolstoi, *My Confession*, chap. iv.

I see the dragon too plainly, and the honey is no longer sweet. What is the meaning of my life ? "

He sought light from Socrates, Buddha, Ecclesiastes,[1] Schopenhauer, but their answers seemed much the same. Human wisdom could only suggest four means of escape from the dilemma of existence. The first is through ignorance : see neither the awaiting dragon nor the mice eating through the plant to which we cling. The second way of escape is the Epicurean : knowing the hopelessness of life, take advantage of every good there is in it, and seek the honey as best we can. " Such is the way," he adds, " in which most people who belong to the circle in which I move reconcile themselves to their fate." The third mode of escape is through decision of character. Deliberately let go of the branch—put an end to the parody of life when we have perceived it is an evil and an absurdity. The fourth and last way is through weakness : drag on, though aware that nothing can come of it. Cling to the branch, waiting for something to happen. " To this class I myself belonged," says Tolstoi. " With the most earnest intellectual effort I could not find a fifth way. My wanderings over the fields of knowledge not only failed to cure me of my despair, but increased it. I could not be deceived. All was vanity. It was a misfortune to be born. Death was better than life, and life's burden must be got rid of."

IV

Ecclesiastes, Tolstoi, and all who still seek for God, " if haply they can find Him," cannot accept pessimism as a solution of the problem of life. Sakya Muni may assume the title of Buddha (the Enlightened) by arriving

[1] Tolstoi, *My Confession*, chaps. vi., vii.

through sheer pity at the final conclusion that life is evil. Schopenhauer may reach the same goal by a philosophic road. But the hunger and thirst of the soul remain. Ecclesiastes, though depressed by the failure of his experiments, still followed the dictates of the heart. Accepting this "sore travail" as a mysterious Divine purpose, it led to the discovery of much compensation for the ills of life. Tolstoi saw a "kindly light" which led him out of the slough of despond. "I cannot describe my experience otherwise than as a searching after God . . . this search was due to a feeling of orphanhood, of isolation amid things all apart from me, of hope in a help I knew not from whom." [1] This seeker found his heart's desire by obeying the instinct to pray and accept life as the gift of God. He found "a fifth way of escape" his intellect could not discover: the way of faith. "Live to seek God and life will not be without Him." [2] Tolstoi pursued his search until more light dawned upon him. He came into the school of Christ, learnt of Him, and found rest for his soul. "When at the age of fifty, having asked all the reputed philosophers as to the meaning of life, and having been told by them that life was an evil . . . I was brought to Christianity . . . the good tidings of Jesus Christ is the revelation of the understanding of life." [3]

Love, wisdom, pleasure still build palaces of art, but the enduring structure has unseen foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

> Love built a stately house, where Fortune came,
> And, spinning phansies, she was heard to say
> That her fine cobwebs did support the frame,

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[1] *My Confession*, chap. xii. [2] *Ibid.*
[3] *The Spirit of Christ's Teaching*, Preface and Conclusion.

Whereas they were supported by the same ;
But, Wisdome quickly swept them all away.

Then, Pleasure came who, liking not the fashion,
Began to make balcones, terraces
Till she had weakened all by alteration ;
But, rev'rend laws and many a proclamation
Reformed all attempts with menaces.

Then, entered Sinne, and with that Sycamore
Whose leaves first sheltred man from drought and dew,
Working and winding slily evermore
The inward walls and sommers cleft and tore ;
But, Grace shor'd these and cut that as it grew.

Then, Sinne combin'd with Death in a firm band
To rase the building to the very floore :
Which they effected, none could them withstand ;
But Love and Grace took Glorie by the hand
And built a braver palace than before.[1]

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[1] George Herbert, *The Temple*—"The World."

V

THE ASCENT OUT OF PESSIMISM

Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee.
Ps. cxxx.

"Deep calls to deep": man's depth would be despair
But for God's deeper depth: we sow to reap.
Have patience, wait, betake ourselves to prayer:
Deep answereth deep.
C. Rossetti (before 1866).

Chapter II. *verses* 12-26.—And I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness and folly: for what (can) the man (do) that cometh after the king? even that which hath been already done.

Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness. The wise man's eyes are in his head, and the fool walketh in darkness: and yet I perceived that one event happeneth to them all. Then said I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so will it happen even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart, that this also was vanity.

For of the wise man, even as of the fool, there is no remembrance for ever; seeing that in the days to come all will have been already forgotten. And how doth the wise man die even as the fool! So I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun was grievous unto me: for all is vanity and a striving after wind. And I hated all my labour wherein I laboured under the sun: seeing that I must leave it unto the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have shewed wisdom under the sun.

This also is vanity. Therefore I turned about to cause my heart to despair concerning all the labour wherein I had laboured under the sun. For there is a man whose labour is with wisdom, and with knowledge, and with skilfulness; yet to a man that hath not laboured therein shall he leave it for his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil. For what hath a man of all his labour, and of the striving of his heart, wherein he laboureth under the sun?

For all his days are but sorrows, and his travail is grief; yea, even in the night his heart taketh no rest. This also is vanity. There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it is from the hand of God. For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, more than I[1]? For to the man that pleaseth him (God) giveth wisdom, and knowledge, and joy: but to the sinner he giveth travail, to gather and to heap up, that he may give to him that pleaseth God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

The pessimism in Ecclesiastes is never a resting-place. It is a despairing mood, never a final conclusion. There is not a touch of satisfaction or pride in realising the "vanity" of life. He has had the world in his grasp, but it has brought him no "profit," and he has suffered the greatest of all losses—loss of spirit. He realises his loss, and is free from all self-delusion. He scorns resorting to any philosophic sedative to numb the pain. The frank confession of Ecclesiastes at this stage is akin to that of a modern thinker, who found himself in the same depths. "I am not ashamed to confess that with the virtual negation of God the Universe to me has lost its soul of loveliness; and although from henceforth the precept 'to work while it is day' will doubtless but gain an intensified force from the terribly intensified meaning of the words, 'the night cometh when no man

[1] Margin, "apart from him."

can work,' yet when at times I think, as think at times I must, of the appalling contrast between the hallowed glory of that creed which once was mine and the lonely mystery of existence as now I find it—at such times I shall ever feel it impossible to avoid the sharpest pang of which my nature is capable." [1]

How different is the tone of this confession from the self-assurance of egotism! Ecclesiastes, like Romanes, knew that he was a poorer man for the loss of faith. The Universe had lost that "soul of loveliness" described by the Psalmist, who heard the heavens declaring the glory of God and the firmament showing His handywork, day unto day uttering speech, and night unto night showing knowledge. He had found no substitute for the "hallowed glory of the creed of Israel." He knew he had lost his way. Involved in the "lonely mystery of existence," he had no language but a cry. "Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee." The despair of Ecclesiastes was very real; but it was born of that "honest doubt" with which may live more faith than a blind acceptance of an orthodox creed. There is always a way out of "the miry clay, the horrible pit" of such despair, and Ecclesiastes found it. He loses his footing and slips back. It is not till the end of the book that he stands on a rock with an old song of Zion in his heart. But here he shows us one way out of the pit.

I

First of all, he reminds us of the significance of his confession. Solomon represents the last word in human wisdom. "What can the man do that cometh after the king? [2] That which men did before." "If you tread

[1] Romanes, *Thoughts on Religion.* [2] ii. 12..

the same weary round, making the same experiments as I have done," says Ecclesiastes, "you will meet with the same unsatisfying results." Then we see a proof of the moral sanity of the man. Though everything seems to lead to the same results, he will not confuse moral distinctions: "Wisdom excelleth folly as light excelleth darkness. The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walketh in darkness." [1] These are not intellectual but moral distinctions. To the Greek, wisdom was cleverness and folly stupidity. But no man is despised in the Hebrew Bible for being dull. The fool hath said in his heart, "There is no God." It is this moral obtuseness which is condemned. Better, far better, says Ecclesiastes, to live a moral life and be true to the light you have, whatever happens, than live in ignorance and sin. Has he then found a secure footing for faith and hope? Will he teach me how to discern wisdom? Alas! he has lost ground again. Though light is better than darkness, it has only enabled him to perceive more clearly that we are all treading the same downward path. In a few short years moral differences will vanish. Both the wise man and the fool will be on the same level of obscurity. "Why was I then more wise?" [2] He has forgotten that wisdom is its own exceeding great reward. He can only say, "This also is vanity." Five times he repeats his monotone as the waves and billows go over him.

It is easy to discover flaws in the logic of the pessimist. The night is never so dark as it appears to him. "There is no remembrance of the wise man more than of the fool," [3] he says. And, whilst he is speaking, he is impersonating Solomon, whose wisdom has immortalised

[1] ii. 14. [2] ii. 15. [3] ii. 16.

him! Has "the fool" the same immortality? Has he forgotten the books he had read, the memorials of wisdom, "the precious life-blood of many a master spirit"? He is in no mood to think out what he is saying. You cannot argue with a pessimist. Let him pour out the blackness of his soul. Do not be shocked by the language of despair, and do not take it too literally. Listen to the raging of the soul-tempest till it has spent its fury. "I hated life." [1] He has reached the abyss. In this horror of darkness thought succeeds thought in maddening succession. What is the use of toiling for posterity? Who can provide against the labour of a wise man being squandered by a fool? He broods over that till it starts another bitter reflection. After all his toil he may leave his inheritance to one who has never worked at all! That which has cost anxious days and sleepless nights may be misspent by a stranger. "This is also vanity." [2]

And now we should expect a despairing conclusion. We should not be surprised to see a soul adrift on a sea of doubt and misery. Instead of that we see its recovery. We hear a new cheery note, proving that there is some anchor to this man's soul which saves him from being at the mercy of wind and wave.

II

"There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and make his soul enjoy good in his labour." [3] There are some who hear in these words nothing deeper than the old Epicurean refrain: "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die." If we do not expect anything better from Ecclesiastes, this is the

[1] ii. 17. [2] ii. 18-23. [3] ii. 24.

obvious conclusion. But, this man has seen the glamour of the self-indulgent life and escaped from its spell. He has told us in a graphic phrase the emptiness of a pleasure-seeking life,[1] and recorded his conviction that wisdom is better than folly. There is no suggestion here of living an idle life. It is an enjoyment of the fruits of toil, the soul enjoys good in his *labour*. If Ecclesiastes can be called Epicurean, he represents that higher type which abandons luxurious living for the simple joys which lie within every man's reach.[2]

Do we then escape from the pit of pessimism by living the "simple life"? Ecclesiastes is too wise to think that happiness is to be found in any condition of life. We are not listening to the tired voice of the city man sighing for the country. He does not dream of peace away from the haunts of men. This is no mere echo of the Psalmist's plaintive cry. "O that I had wings like a dove, I would fly away and be at rest." The shrinking genius of Cowper fancied that God made the country and man made the town, but experience does not realise the hope raised by idealising any condition of life. God's way was just as mysterious to Cowper at Olney as in London. Philosophy has often failed to translate "tongues in trees" or read "books in the running brooks." "When Wordsworth tells us (says John Morley) 'that one impulse from a vernal wood can teach you more of man, of moral evil and of good than all the sages can,' such a proposition cannot be taken seriously. No impulse from a vernal wood can teach us anything at all of moral evil and of good." [3] Ecclesiastes does call us to a simpler life. A life of slothful indulgence and

[1] "Feeding on wind." [2] See Plumptre, p. 123.
[3] Preface to Wordsworth's Poems.

æsthetic refinement is renounced in favour of industry and the cheerful enjoyment of ordinary blessings. The real wants of life are few, and there is a joy in working to secure them. But the contact with Nature, than which "there is nothing better for a man," is far removed from the idyll of Cowper and Wordsworth. It is more in harmony with the experience of a Millet, the peasant genius, whose simple heart was equally in touch with Nature, Man, and God. Millet saw the tragedy of life with the purity of heart which sees God. True to life, yet seeing no life apart from the transfiguring vision of God, the hardness, the weariness, the ugliness of human experience grew before him into those pictures of beauty which have become a joy for ever.[1]

III

Ecclesiastes climbs out of the pit by degrees. The way of escape is not by the gratification of the lower life, not in any ideal condition, but in accepting life as the gift of God. "This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God."[2] If retrospect be dreary and he has no prospects, he will make the most of the present.

> No longer forward nor behind
> I look in hope or fear;
> But, grateful, take the good I find,
> The best of now and here.[3]

Ecclesiastes recognises this as the Divine Will. He had seen some purpose in the mystery of life explaining the "sore travail" with which the sons of men were exercised.[4] Now, he accepts the common gifts of life from the same Hand. The capacity to enjoy them

[1] Cartwright, *Life of Millet.* [2] ii. 24.
[3] Whittier. [4] i. 13.

comes from God. The hungry soul " feeding on wind " is fed by a Providential provision. " For, who can eat with enjoyment apart from Him ? " [1] The simplicity of the ancient faith of Israel reasserts itself in the mind of this man. To Epicurus the thought of a Divine influence in human affairs disturbed that serenity of mind at which philosophy aimed. Zeno discerned a Divine order in which man had a place if only he could manage to find it. Ecclesiastes was educated in a better school. He finds his place in life not by Stoic resignation, but by faith in the Divine character. The enjoyment he anticipates is the " wisdom, knowledge, and joy " which God gives to the man who pleases Him.[2] He clings once more to the assurance that there is a moral government of the world, that God's blessing or judgment is pronounced according to character. Did he recall the psalm of his childhood, " Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. . . . The ungodly are not so " . . . ? Sustained by this faith, Ecclesiastes seems to reach solid ground again. In a moment of despair he had said, " In much wisdom is much grief, and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth pain." Now, content with a little, with God's blessing to make it much, he has found a wisdom which is not grief, an increase of knowledge which increases happiness. With deeper insight he can also perceive further signs of moral order in the disorder of the world. If the labour of a wise man often descends to a fool, it is also true that ill-gotten gains often pass

[1] ii. 25. The marginal reading of the R.V. is an improvement on the text : " Who can eat . . . more than I ? " " Apart from Him " means unless God will it and make it possible (Plumptre and Delitzsch and M'Neile).

[2] ii. 26.

into good hands: "the sinner gathers and heaps up that he may give to him that pleaseth God."[1] Thus Ecclesiastes found his way out of the depths. He caught a fleeting glimpse of the truth which had sustained kings and prophets and Psalmists, and throws light on the riddle of the Universe. The happiest man is not the wisest or the richest, but the man who accepts life as the gift of God, and knows how to enjoy common things. The cloud overshadowed him again. It will grow darker still. But that sense of God behind and above all will finally give him "a happy issue out of all his affliction."

Can work and suffering harmonise with this sense of God? We see it in the sombre life of Jean François Millet. With a poetic imagination of the highest order, his life was hard and prosaic. This wise man's eyes were "in his head," and yet his finest masterpieces were rejected by foolish juries who "walked in darkness." He saw the "vanity" of life, and was often tempted to hate all his labour "under the sun." Disillusioned by his Parisian experiences, he broke from the slavery of conventional art, and pitched his tent in the village of Barbizon, "where his soul enjoyed good in his labour." His life was ever a struggle against circumstances, but he rose above them. "Man goeth forth to his labour until the evening" is the text of all his work. "I am no philosopher," he said, "I do not pretend to do away with pain or to find a formula which will make me a Stoic or indifferent to evil. Suffering is perhaps the one thing that gives an artist power to express himself clearly."[2] The year in which he painted "The Angelus" was one of the darkest of his life, yet he told us there,

[1] ii. 26. [2] Cartwright's *Life of Millet*, p. 79.

for ever, the secret of suffering, work, and worship harmonising together. Against the sombre background of a brief autumn day stand the figures of the young labourer and his wife. Hardly distinguishable from the clods of the field as they toil in the grey evening light, now their heads are bowed in prayer at the sound of the Angelus bell. Work, suffering, love are consecrated by worship.

Ecclesiastes, racked with the pain of sympathy, baffled with life's problems, bows his head in worship. Amidst all the mystery and weariness of life we ever hear the "angelus" summons. We look up from our work and find the Heaven which lay about our infancy, lying about us still.

VI

TIME AND THE EVERLASTING

To see a world in a grain of sand
And Heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.

BLAKE, *Auguries of Innocence.*

"Within me there is more," runs the fine device inscribed on the beams and pediment of an old patrician mansion at Bruges which every traveller visits; filling a corner of one of those tender and melancholy quays that are as forlorn and lifeless as though they existed only on canvas. . . . And so too might man exclaim, "Within me there is more; every law of morality, every intelligible mystery."

MAETERLINCK, *The Buried Temple*, "The Mystery of Justice."

Chapter III. *verses* 1-11.—To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven. A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted. A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up. A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance. A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing. A time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away. A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak. A time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboureth?

I have seen the travail which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised therewith. He hath made everything

beautiful in its time: also he hath set the world[1] in their heart, yet so that man cannot find out the work that God hath done from the beginning even to the end.

Ecclesiastes perceives a Divine order in the world in spite of its anomalies. Inspired by that thought, he draws up a list of times and seasons in parallel columns. Life is full of contrasts, and yet everything harmonises with the Divine order. There is a time and the right time for everything. Sometimes the clock simply strikes. We have nothing to do with it: "There is a time to be born, a time to die." Sometimes the time is definitely fixed, but everything depends upon us whether anything happens: "There is a time to plant, a time to pluck up that which is planted." Sometimes we may choose our time, which may or may not be opportune: "There is a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to keep silence and a time to speak."

I

Ecclesiastes does not teach a Stoic fatalism.[2] He does not mean to discourage human effort. There is no necessity dogging our steps, keeping us in certain grooves, compelling us to love or hate. We do seem hemmed in by limitations, and there are many things we cannot alter. But it does not follow that because we are bound in some directions we are not free at all. Wisdom lies in adapting ourselves to a Divine order. The freedom of the will is vindicated by a great utterance later: "God made man upright, but they have sought out many inventions."[3] You have only to read through this table of contrasts to see how much in our life is a

[1] Margin, "eternity."

[2] See Cheyne (*Job and Solomon*, chap. xi.), and M'Neile, p. 50.

[3] vii. 29.

matter of choice; for we may be frivolous or serious, builders or destroyers.

Yet Ecclesiastes is awed by the sense of God. He has learnt by painful experience the wisdom of accepting the Divine order. He knows that any measure of real happiness we enjoy depends upon the way we conform to it. He insists, somewhat tediously, on the fact that the smallest circumstances and events fit in with a Divine purpose. Perhaps, on looking back on his life, he had a glimpse of the magnificent harmony God can produce out of the most discordant life, making all things work together for good. When Martin Luther wrote his memorable appeal to the Christian nobility of the German nation in 1520, the first battle word of the Reformation, he began thus: "The time for silence is gone, the time to speak has come." No one told him it was the right time. Everybody tried to persuade him that his clock was too fast. Conscience told him the time, and he asked for no other intimation that the hour for spiritual freedom had come.[1] Ecclesiastes read no hope in the signs of the times. He lived amidst social anarchy: there was more breaking down than building up, more love of war than peace. He was more disposed to be silent than speak, to mourn than dance. But he believed that it was a time to speak. Responsive to an inner voice, he gave the benefit of his experience for all future generations. Knowing that man is both a dependent creature whilst morally responsible, he worked out his own salvation from the tyranny of temperament, for the spirit of God worked within him to will and to do of His good pleasure.

[1] See Luther's Primary Works, "Address to the German Christian Nobility."

It is characteristic of this man to see the shadows of life when you think he is emerging from them. This great law of times and seasons depresses him. It raises a despairing question. "What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboureth?" Does this knowledge of a Divine order really help a man? May it not actually increase the mystery of life? Who can be sure that he knows the right season? Proverbial wisdom says, "Time and tide wait for no man." But the chance of missing the "tide" in our affairs, which leads on to fortune, is perhaps greater than the chance of taking it. What profit? It is the old commercial question. Is there any margin of profit in this business of living, laughing, and crying, getting and spending, loving and hating! We seem to build up with one hand and pull down with the other. An endless diversity of doing opposite things neutralises all effort and the result is nothing.

Ecclesiastes seems to be ruled exclusively by a commercial estimate of life. This is the "time" when he is inspired to make one of his profoundest utterances.

II

This thinker is never afraid of repeating himself. "I have seen the travail which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised in it."[1] He had seen that before, though it brought little comfort to him. He looks more closely at life, with a mind developed by a wider experience. This man is reverent without ceasing to be an enquirer, because he is sure that whilst God humbles our pride, He does not mean to crush our spirit. And truth hidden from the "wise" is revealed to a

[1] i. 13.

childlike heart. "He hath made everything beautiful in its time: also he hath put eternity in their heart, so that man cannot find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end."[1] The Divine order is beautiful. In what does this beauty consist? Perhaps the Jew finds rest for a moment in the primeval faith of Israel that all things were created "very good." The world, though enveloped in a cloud of mystery, is a Divine masterpiece. Something of the Greek sense of beauty may have dawned upon him; that haunting dream which veiled the world of reality. Did he guess that "increasing purpose which runs through the ages, towards the far-off Divine event to which the whole creation moves"? We know little of the vision of beauty which flashed upon Ecclesiastes. "It is beautiful in its *time*," he says. The beauty consists in being beautifully timed. Was this a faint echo of the Psalmist's faith, "My times are in Thy Hand," expressing the faith of our own poet:

> God never is before His time
> And never is behind.[2]

Even events which seem untimely may have their own fitting place in God's world plan.

If Ecclesiastes had been a Greek, he might have made this his resting-place. The Greek sense of beauty was a vision of delight. It made the world so glorious that he hardly hankered after another. But the love of beauty, in itself, is not religion. It may exist side by side with deformity of character. A well-known writer has said, "With me beauty is quite primary in life; I like truth and goodness wholly because they are beauti-

[1] iii. 11; "eternity," marginal reading. [2] Cowper.

ful." [1] This is the language of a certain school which has considerable charm of thought. But it is largely the charm of a revived paganism. The mere love of the beautiful may not lift us an inch above the lower life. If the love of the beautiful is not rooted in religion it may be as destructive as the love of the moth for the fascinating flame. Only when religion is primary do we understand the revelation of beauty.

I slept and dreamed that life was beauty;
I woke and found that life was duty.
Was my dream, then, a shadowy lie?
Toil on, sad heart, courageously,
And thou shalt find thy dream shall be
A noonday light and truth to thee.[2]

III

". . . also he hath set eternity in their heart, so that man cannot find out the work of God from the beginning to the end."

Ecclesiastes reaches the loftiest peak in the range of his thought. God has not only made everything beautiful in its season. His work is still grander. He has implanted in man, limited by time, the sense of the everlasting.[3] This may not be the hope of immortality or lead to further discoveries. It may seem to mock our quest and be the secret cause of all the restlessness and weariness of life. For with the sense of beauty and

[1] H. G. Wells, *The New Machiavelli*.

[2] Mrs. Hooper. And read *The Ultimate Belief*, chap. v., "The Aesthetic Activity" (Clutton-Brock).

[3] Cox quotes a saying of M. de Lamennais: "Do you know what it is that makes man the most suffering of all creatures? It is that he has one foot in the finite and the other in the infinite, and that he is torn asunder between two worlds" ("Ecclesiastes," *Expositor's Bible*, p. 182).

the everlasting, man seeks to probe deeper into the beginning and end of things, only to find that he cannot grasp the scheme of the Universe. The more he searches the more he is conscious of ignorance. It produces world sorrow, "the heavy and the weary weight of all this unintelligible world." Yet this stamp of God upon us is the most beautiful thing in the world!

> Who would lose,
> Tho' full of pain, this intellectual being,
> Those thoughts that wander thro' Eternity,
> To perish rather, swallowed up and lost
> In the wide womb of uncreated night,
> Devoid of sense and motion? [1]

Some have misunderstood the meaning of Ecclesiastes.[2] Martin Luther, with our own Bacon, read "he hath set the world in their heart." "God has framed the mind like a glass," says Bacon,[3] "capable of the image of the Universe and desirous to receive it as the eye to receive the light." Man is a small world with the conception of a bigger world around him. No doubt we have the "image of the Universe" and the life of Bacon may illustrate it. Bacon's mind was like a glass. He was singularly capable and desirous of receiving vast ideas. Few have been endowed with such an intellect. He saw the beauty of the world with a lover's eye and guessed the hidden loveliness of Science. Yet his life was poor and unhappy. He was essentially "a man of the world," and with "great possessions" he made the great refusal to follow Truth. He who took all knowledge for his province, knew little of himself

[1] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book II.

[2] See Appendix, Note D, for grounds for translating "he hath set eternity in the heart."

[3] *Advancement of Learning*, Book I.

or the finer possibilities of human nature. He sought first self-advancement, and, elevated to the highest honour, his fall was ignominious. Pope's epitaph speaks of the "vanity of life" and the strange inconsistency of his character "the brightest, wisest, meanest of mankind."

Bacon's mistranslation of Ecclesiastes is symbolic of all failure to translate the true meaning of life. The Hebrew expression, used nearly three hundred times in the Old Testament, never denotes worldly affairs.[1] It is the sense of the infinite. Times and seasons, the boundaries of our life, are contrasted with "the everlasting" whose beginning and end are hidden from us. Ecclesiastes is conscious of

> those obstinate questionings
> Of sense and outward things,
> Fallings from us, vanishings;
> Blank misgivings of a Creature
> Moving about in worlds not realised.[2]

Our life is enclosed by a great wall of sense, yet we are ever striving to look over it. We see a certain order in the world, but it is "a broken arc" not "a perfect round." We spend our years as a tale that is told, but the plot does not work out and the end is as obscure as the beginning. We get and spend, rend and sew, love and hate, yet none of these things exhausts our powers. Each may be beautiful in its time, but it is only for a time. There are times when we think the world is enough. We become absorbed in getting and spending. In the Baconian spirit, we ransack the Universe for its treasures, money, position, power and knowledge. And we get them all; without rest.

[1] Ginsburg. [2] Wordsworth, "Intimations of Immortality."

God, if this were enough—
To thrill with the joy of girded men,
To go on for ever and fail and go on again,
And be mauled to the earth and arise,
And contend for the shade of a word and a thing not seen with the eyes:
With the half of a broken hope for a pillow at night
That somehow the right is the right,
And the smooth shall bloom from the rough:
Lord, if that were enough! [1]

IV

If the hope of immortality be precarious in this book, yet Ecclesiastes is the interpreter of the heart in expressing the sense of the everlasting.

We are ever seeking to peer through that "window thro' which solemn vistas are opened into Infinitude itself." [2] Perhaps we cannot explain or define it—we are only disturbed with

The joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man.[3]

But, whatever our experience has been, man, inseparable from the stream of life, knows that he is something greater than the stream.

We feel that we are greater than we know.[4]

The sense of disproportion between our nature and the world in which we dwell, increases the mystery. This creature, with Eternity in his heart, is limited by "times"

[1] Stevenson, *If this were Faith!* [2] Carlyle, *Schiller.*
[3] Wordsworth, "Lines written above Tintern Abbey."
[4] *Ibid.* "The River Duddon."

beautiful but transient. We were happy when we loved, but the day of separation came. It was blessed to speak, but the dark day of unutterable silence followed. Times of war overshadow times of peace. "Every other creature presents the most perfect correspondence between nature and circumstances, powers and occupations. Man alone is like some poor land-blown bird, blown out to sea and floating half-drowned, with clinging plumage on an ocean where the dove 'finds no rest for the sole of her foot.'" [1]

The profoundest of all the "guesses at truth" in this book is confirmed in the Christian revelation. Man "a creature of times and seasons" is not a man of the world. When he has gained the whole world, the old question recurs "What doth it profit?" With a sense of the beautiful there is a longing for an unknown Good. "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" is wrung from the heart by many experiences, uttered in many languages, expressed in the form of poetry, philosophy, and religion.

. . . . . .

> Think you, 'mid all this mighty sum
> Of things for ever speaking,
> That nothing of itself will come,
> But we must still be seeking? [2]

The incarnation of Jesus Christ is the audible voice of God, the Seeker of man. He was limited by our "times." "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." There was a time to be born and a time to die—a time to break down and a time to build up. He knew the time to keep silence and the time to speak. Eternity blended with Time in that mysterious transcendent

[1] Maclaren.
[2] Wordsworth, "Expostulation and Reply."

union disclosing the unearthly beauty of the Son of Man. He is touched with all our feeling. "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head." If these words have their deepest and most pathetic meaning in His own earthly life of "travail," we may venture to give them the further application that whilst all the lower creatures are at rest here, the more truly a man is man, the less can he find in this world a pillow for his head, rest for the heart.[1] Where, then, shall this restless immortal creature find rest? Ecclesiastes learnt to interpret the hunger of the heart as hunger for God. He saw at last that all the passing beauty pointed to a fadeless life. He dimly understood that God had set eternity in man's heart and yet placed him under conditions of time that he might learn to clasp to his heart the unchanging realities. "Fear God and keep His commandments." "Come unto Me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

I could not see for blinding tears
The glories of the West:
A heavenly music filled my ears
A heavenly peace my breast.
"Come unto Me, come unto Me—
All ye that labour unto Me—
Ye heavy laden, come to Me—
And I will give you rest." [2]

[1] A. Maclaren. [2] Lewis Carroll.

VII

THE DESCENT FROM THE SUBLIME

A still small voice spake unto me,
"Thou art so full of misery,
Were it not better not to be?"

"Whatever crazy sorrow saith,
No life that breathes with human breath
Hath ever truly long'd for death.

"'Tis life, whereof our nerves are scant,
Oh life, not death, for which we pant;
More life, and fuller, that I want."

TENNYSON, "The Two Voices."

Chapter III. *verses* 12-22.—I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice, and to do good so long as they live. And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy good in all his labour, is the gift of God. I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor anything taken from it: and God hath done it, that men should fear before Him. That which is, hath been already; and that which is to be hath already been: and God seeketh again that which is passed away. And moreover I saw under the sun, in the place of judgment, that wickedness was there; and in the place of righteousness, that wickedness was there.

I said in mine heart, God shall judge the righteous and the wicked: for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work. I said in mine heart, It is because of the sons of men, that God may prove them, and that they may see that they themselves are but as beasts. For that which befalleth the sons

of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; and man hath no pre-eminence above the beasts: for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.

Who knoweth the spirit of man whether it goeth [1] upward, and the spirit of the beast whether it goeth downward to the earth?

Wherefore I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his works; for that is his portion: for who shall bring him back to see what shall be after him?

WITHOUT knowledge of a future life Ecclesiastes cannot find scope for his eternal want. He descends from a sublime height to his former conclusion "to eat and drink and enjoy good in all his labour as the gift of God." This is far above mere sensual gratification. Ignorant of the deeper ways of God and involved in a network of "time," still he knows there is a moral government of the world. In a world where seasons come and go and return with never-failing regularity, the unchangeableness of the Divine Will is the ground of worship: "God doeth it that men may fear before Him." [2] Ecclesiastes never loses himself in clouds of speculation. The thought of Eternity does not make him a dreamer. Though he descends from the sublime to the commonplace, it is the commonplace of duty and worship. A scientist has lately given the same counsel to his students: "Do not look into the future as the time in which you are going to live. If you do not live now, you will never be able to live, because it will always feel like 'now' wherever and whenever you are. Eternity is not something in the future. It will never feel more like Eternity than it does to-day. Take as my message: 'The

[1] Margin, "that goeth." [2] iii. 14.

kingdom of Heaven is within you' and 'Now is the accepted time.'" [1]

I

Ecclesiastes does not retire from the world to a contemplative life. He never loses touch with his fellowmen or spares himself the pain of sympathy with the common experience. Mixing with the crowd at courts of justice and ecclesiastical councils, with true fellow-feeling, he takes to heart everything he sees. The times are corrupt: in the places of judgment and righteousness he sees wickedness. The unjust judge who "fears not God nor regards man" sits on the bench. The widow pleads to be avenged of her adversary, but in vain. Even the religious courts are ruled by self-seeking men. Ecclesiastes looks to a higher tribunal: God shall judge the righteous and the wicked. How long? he cried "for there is a time *there* [2] for every purpose and for every work." God has His own time for vindicating His moral character. It is right and beautiful in its time. But the strain of waiting is a fearful test of faith. Can faith endure it?

> What wonder if yon torn and naked throng
> Should doubt a Heaven that seems to wink and nod,
> And, having moaned at noontide "Lord, how long?"
> Should cry, "Where hidest Thou?" at evenfall.
> At midnight, "Is He deaf and blind our God?"
> And ere day dawn, "Is He indeed at all?" [3]

The thought of future judgment survives the perplexities of Ecclesiastes.[4] A time "there" seems to point,

[1] Sir Oliver Lodge. [2] iii. 17 (Plumptre, p. 134).
[3] William Watson.
[4] See Appendix, Note E, "Judgment in Ecclesiastes."

emphatically, to the Divine balances in which all actions shall be weighed. It may bring little comfort to him, and it is obscured by the apparent despotism of injustice, but it is a gleam of light on his dark way. This conviction inspired him and contributed to the happy conclusion of the book. For his last word is "God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil." [1]

II

How can the delays of the Divine justice be explained? Why do the "mills of God" grind so slowly? "I said in my heart, it is because of the sons of men, that God might test them and that they might see that they are beasts—they by themselves." [2] Those who take a dark view of this book find in these words a confirmation of their suspicion of Ecclesiastes. His rare flashes of insight do not relieve the habitual gloom of his mind. He is a pessimist at heart. He has blurted out his real convictions in saying that all God's dealings with men are only meant to show that man and beast are alike in origin and destiny. No doubt he was often tempted to take this view. He was often staggered by the anomalies of life, and assailed by the subtle arguments of a materialistic philosophy. But in the light of what we have read, and in the light of his ultimate conclusions, it is impossible to place Ecclesiastes among those who take the lowest view of human nature. What is the view of man at his best according to Ecclesiastes? "He is a moral being, the object of God's discipline. He cannot enjoy the

[1] xii. 14.

[2] iii. 18 (Plumptre's translation). See Appendix on "Man and Beast," Note F.

commonest blessings without recognising the Divine Giver. He lives amidst a Divine order, with a sense of the good and beautiful, yet with immortal cravings that nothing in the world can satisfy." Such is the man whom Ecclesiastes is supposed to describe as no better than a beast! But his language is capable of a better translation.

He accepts a key used by Hebrew prophets in time of stress. The way of God with man is probationary. His discipline is designed to purify and refine. The winds of God blow that they may winnow and cleanse. The Divine purpose "tests" and "sifts" men that they may learn that, apart from God "they are beasts—*they by themselves*."[1] If the word "beast" sounds too contemptuous, we may recall the language of one of the Psalmists who applied the same epithet to himself. One of the sons of Asaph sounded almost the same depths as Ecclesiastes.[2] His feet were almost gone—his steps had well-nigh slipped. The prosperity of the ungodly made thought too painful for him, until he went into the sanctuary of God. In the light of revelation he saw light on life and the depths out of which he had climbed. He wondered at his moral obtuseness and did not spare himself. "So foolish was I and ignorant: I was as a beast before Thee." Such is man apart from God. The man with "eternity in the heart" may descend to the level of the brute, and then there is little to distinguish between them. This picture of human depravity has no darker colours than those used by the Psalmist. "Man that is in honour and understandeth not is like the beasts that perish."[3] Both are subject to accidents

[1] iii. 18 (Plumptre's translation).
[2] Ps. lxxiii. [3] Ps. xlix. 20.

and go unto one place.[1] It is characteristic of Ecclesiastes to follow the relentless logic of materialism. But what are his own hopes? He seems to borrow the formula of scepticism. "Who knows?" "Who knoweth the spirit of man whether it goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast whether it goeth downward to the earth?" Who knows? asked Lucretius, answering his own question with emphatic denial.[2] Who knows? asked Montaigne, with a shrug of the shoulders and a cynical smile. Who knows? asks Ecclesiastes, and his words imply a strictly sceptical rather than a negative answer. They do not actually deny, still less do they affirm that the spirit of man ascends. He remains here in suspense. Still (says Plumptre) scepticism is a step above denial.

There is at least the conception of a spirit that ascends to a life higher than its own as a possible solution of the great enigma presented by the disorders of the world. It is not till the end of the book that he is able to answer the question with a larger hope. "The dust shall return to the earth as it was and the spirit shall return to God who gave it."

III

If a man die shall he live again?

The hope of immortality has survived in the best experience. "If the celestial hope be a delusion, then (says Martineau) we plainly see who are the mistaken. Not the mean and grovelling souls who never reached to so great a thought—not the drowsy and easy natures who are content with the sleep of sense through life and the sleep of darkness ever after—not the selfish and

[1] iii. 20. [2] *De Rerum natura.*

pinched of conscience, of small thought and smaller love; no, these in such case are right, and the universe is in their miserable scale. The deceived are the great and holy whom all men revere, the men who have lived for something better than their happiness, and spent themselves in the race, or fallen at the altar of human good. Whom are we to revere or what can we believe if the inspirations of the highest of created creatures are but cunningly devised fables?" [1]

If it is true that no man is born into this world whose work is not born with him,[2] it is equally true that many a man never finds out what that work is, and has to make a living the best way he can. Think of the amazing disproportion between capacity and attainment! Stand with me in some country churchyard.

> Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
> Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
> Hands, that the rod of Empire might have sway'd
> Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre!
>
> Some village-Hampden, that with dauntless breast
> The little tyrant of his fields withstood,
> Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,
> Some Cromwell, guiltless of his country's blood! [3]

These rustics may have had no poetry, no heroism in them at all—but suppose they had! Can we believe that the dormant power will never awake? We may make the appeal to time, but time on a much larger scale than we know.

It is written in our hearts that the trinity of ideas—

[1] Read Milton's "Lycidas," Shelley's "Adonais," Browning's "La Saisiaz," for thoughts on this 'celestial hope.'

[2] Lowell, *A Glance behind the Curtain.*

[3] Gray, "Elegy in a Country Churchyard."

God, Freedom, Immortality—are inseparable. If we believe that God has made us and not we ourselves, and made us free to worship Him, we know also that all our attempts to do so come far short of our desire. The more imperative is that desire, the more noble our discontent, the more we are sustained by the faith that the Divine purpose will not ultimately be defeated. For, to tell me that I am free, and that God expects me to realise myself, and yet not give me scope to do it, is to undermine my faith in any spiritual intelligence and freedom.

Man cannot share the life of the lower animal creation.[1] His pain is nobler than their peace. A Walt Whitman may think that he could live with animals,

> they are so placid and self-contained,
> They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
> They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
> Not one is dissatisfied. . . .
> Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.[2]

And he might have added, "Not one could have written a 'Song of Myself'; not one could appreciate a line of poetry or dream of a higher life!" The discontent of man is born out of those intimations of immortality which redeem our life and prolong hope. Yet how dim and precarious they are in themselves! In a Marcus Aurelius, the last and best representative of Roman stoicism, the thought of a future life never rose beyond a vague and mournful aspiration.[3]

IV

Dr. George Adam Smith entitled a chapter of his

[1] See Appendix, Note F, on "Man and Beast."
[2] "Song of Myself." [3] Lecky, *European Morals*, vol. i. chap. ii.

study of the Prophet Isaiah "An Old Testament believer's sick-bed, or the difference Christ has made." [1] Hezekiah is the representative king and saint of the Old Testament. A collector of what was best in its literature and the reformer of what was worst in its worship, Hezekiah enjoyed the ministry of one of the greatest of the prophets. Yet we find his sick-bed wrapped in gloom.[2] With his back to life and facing the unknown future, he can see nothing but an abyss. His imagination figures the gloomy portals of a nether world into which death herds the shades of men, bloodless, voiceless, without love or hope or aught that makes life worth living.[3]

The difference Christ has made! When Anaxagoras was told that his son had died, he simply observed, "I never supposed that I had begotten an immortal." "Compare this famous remark (says Lecky) with that of one of the early Christian hermits. Some one told him that his father was dead. 'Cease your blasphemy,' he answered, 'my father is immortal.'" [4] Think of the audacity of Christian art and song—the rapturous vision of

> the land of pure delight
> Where saints immortal reign.

There is much fancy and extravagance of metaphor in these pictures, but what fired the imagination to such a glow? A great fact stands between us and Anaxagoras, Hezekiah, Ecclesiastes. The doubt of Ecclesiastes, the fears of Hezekiah were answered in the advent of Jesus Christ. Christ has made all the difference, and by His life and death and resurrection brought life and immortality to light!

[1] *Isaiah*, vol. i. Book IV. [2] Isaiah xxxviii.
[3] G. A. Smith. [4] Lecky, *European Morals*, vol. i. chap. ii.

Jesus Christ confirms the hope of the ages that man shall live again. This celestial hope is Divinely inspired, and the best men in all ages have been the guardians of the secret. Christ shares our sense of incompleteness, our longing to see the promise of life fulfilled. "Ye shall be perfect, even as your Father is perfect." [1] It is a revelation of the Divine purpose towards which the whole creation is moving. How can I become perfect on the limited scale of mortal life? In the revelation of God the Father, in a never-ceasing appeal to the will, in the pledge of immortality Jesus Christ for ever linked these three ideas together. The Christian revelation implies that this Trinity is inseparable: God, Freedom of the will, Immortality.

Jesus Christ discouraged curiosity, yet did not hesitate to use even highly coloured scenery as a background to teach that the next world will be essentially the triumph of the spirit over the lower life. The great gulf between Dives and Lazarus is created not by social but moral distinctions: [2] the spirit of man goeth upward; the spirit of the beast goeth downward. The real essence and warrant of immortality is the possibility of fellowship with God. To the Sadducee who says that there is no resurrection, neither angel nor spirit, Jesus Christ says "God is not the God of the dead but of the living; for all live unto Him." [3] Given the spiritual personality of God and the related personality of man, immortality is necessarily involved in their relation to each other. Our present sacramental union with Jesus Christ is the pledge of this abundant life.

"Let not your heart be troubled." "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so I should have

[1] St. Matthew v. 48. [2] St. Luke xvi. [3] St. Luke xx. 38.

told you. I go to prepare a place for you."[1] "I read these words for at least the thousandth time, and for the first time that I remember with any attention this morning," wrote Ruskin, on the morning of January 27, 1873; "I have the profoundest sympathy with Thomas and would fain put all his questions over again, and twice as many more." "These 'many mansions' how are they to be prepared for us?—how are we to be prepared for them?" For this reason our hearts should not be troubled. Man hath this pre-eminence over the beast, that when the lower animal life dies, the higher spiritual life can be at home in the Father's house. If it were not so—if we were mocked by the dream of immortality—Christ would have told us.

. . . . . .

"If a man die shall he live again?" There is one man who we pray may die and never live again.

> Ah for a man to arise in me,
> That the man I am may cease to be![2]

When the lower life is subordinate—when the beast nature is the servant of the man—when the spirit of Jesus Christ dwelleth in us, man is conqueror of life and death.

[1] St. John xiv.

[2] Tennyson, "Maud."

VIII

THE NEED OF A COMFORTER

Think not thou canst sigh a sigh
And thy Maker is not by:
Think not thou canst weep a tear
And thy Maker is not near.

BLAKE, *Another's Sorrow.*

For a tear is an intellectual thing
And a sigh is the sword of an Angel king.
And the bitter groan of a martyr's woe
Is an arrow from the Almighty's bow.

BLAKE.

Chapter IV.—Then I returned and saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold, the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power, but they had no comforter. Wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are yet alive; yea, better than them both is he which hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun. Then I saw all labour and every skilful work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbour. This also is vanity and a striving after wind. The fool foldeth his hands together, and eateth his own flesh. Better is a handful with quietness, than two handfuls with labour and striving after wind. Then I returned and saw vanity under the sun. There is one that is alone and he hath not a second; yea, he hath neither son nor brother; yet is there no end of all his labour,

neither are his eyes satisfied with riches. For whom then (saith he) do I labour and deprive my soul of good ?

This also is vanity, yea, it is a sore travail. Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow ; but woe to him that is alone when he falleth, and hath not another to lift him up. Again, if two lie together then they have warmth : but how can one be warm alone ?

And if a man prevail against him that is alone, two shall withstand him ; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Better is a poor and wise youth, than an old and foolish king, who knoweth not how to receive admonition any more.

For out of prison he came forth to be king ; yea, even in his kingdom he was born poor. I saw all the living which walk under the sun, that they were with the youth, the second, that stood up in his stead. There was no end of all the people, even of all them over whom he was : yet they that come after shall not rejoice in him.

Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind.

We notice a growing sympathy in Ecclesiastes. The note of pity is the beginning of a better life.

He has found a more interesting subject than himself, his own pains and pleasures. He looks around on society. He sees some giant power using its strength like a giant, and he sees the tears on the faces of the poor. It awakens fellow-feeling, and though at first he seems to despair he is already a better man in rising above personal complaint and voicing the needs of the world. It is so easy to be self-conscious, to feel that everything is wrong because things are not going right with us. Yet all the time we may be wrapped up in ourselves, unmoved by a world of need around us. The best way to bear sorrow is to find a greater sorrow to bear, and when our hearts are genuinely touched by the tears of others our own grief will be of a nobler type. We find light on our own way when we seek it for those who walk in darkness.

Richard Cobden called on John Bright on a dark day. He found him in the depths of despair, for in the loss of his wife he seemed to have lost the light of life. Whilst the strong man sat dazed and helpless Cobden ventured to appeal to him. "Do you know," he said, "there are thousands of homes in England where mothers and children are without bread! Come with me and we will never rest till the Corn laws are repealed." And John Bright responded. Still involved in the mystery of his experience he saw "the tears of such as were oppressed," and he went out to that crusade which brought infinite comfort to the homes of the people.[1]

I

"They had no comforter." In these words we see the heart of Ecclesiastes. Probably a wealthy man, with the taste of a student, he did not stand aloof from his fellow-men. Nothing human was foreign to his sympathies. With a solitary brooding temperament he had a deep sense of brotherhood, and free from many of the cares of life he chose to bear the burdens of his fellow-men.

> Had I been asked what clothing I would wear,
> I would have said, "more angel and less worm."
> But for their sake, who are even such as I
> Of the same mingled blood, I would not choose
> To hate that meaner portion of myself
> Which makes me brother to the least of men.[2]

The social background of this book is dark. There were dark days in the age of Solomon when the king aspired to rival other Oriental monarchs in the splendour

[1] Morley's *Life of Cobden*, chap. viii.
[2] O. W. Holmes, *The Poet at the Breakfast-Table.*

of his capital. The liberties of his people were often sacrificed in his extensive building enterprises. But Solomon proved his wisdom in organising the Empire and perfecting a system of civil tribunals.[1] How different now, under Persian or Greek misrule! The helpless and innocent were at the mercy of those appointed to guard the interests of the community. It was a reign of terror. The poor crouched under the heel of tyranny, and had no comforter. The state of Egypt under the Ptolemies exactly corresponds to that drawn by Ecclesiastes.[2]

Ecclesiastes does not weary his afflicted countrymen with proverbial philosophy. He does not think that maxims can make crooked things straight. He does not moralise. He simply shares the burden by taking the misery of his fellow-men to heart. It is intolerable! All this increases the melancholy of the man. He can bear his own troubles with stoic fortitude, but the sight of unrelieved sorrow breaks him down. In this depression of spirit he "praises the dead more than the living." This despairing note is very real, but it is a step higher than the hatred of life which broke from him when first he poured out his soul.[3] That was simply the weariness of a self-absorbed satiety; this arises from the nobler contemplation of the sorrows of humanity. He has lost all sense of Divine comfort. God seems far away. He does not hear the voice his fathers heard. "O thou afflicted! tossed with tempest and not comforted! Behold I will lay thy stones with fair colours and thy foundations with sapphires . . . thou shalt be free from oppression . . . thou shalt not fear."[4]

[1] See Kent, *A History of the Hebrew People*, vol. i. chap. xii.
[2] Plumptre, p. 138. [3] Chap. i. [4] Isaiah liv.

This brave, generous heart, unsoured by disappointment, longs to help his fellow-men, and from the darkness of his despair we hear the plaintive yearning cry "They have no comforter . . . they have no comforter."

II

Many cannot understand how a man who came to praise the dead more than the living could ever rise above pessimism.[1] What is the difference between this despairing phrase and the note of Buddhism or modern pessimism? With Ecclesiastes it is a mood: with ancient and modern pessimism it is a conclusion. The greatest minds are susceptible to such a mood. The genius of John Bunyan was tinged with it. Christian and Hopeful in Doubting Castle fell under the same spell. "Brother," said Christian, smarting under the tyranny of Giant Despair, "what shall we do? The life that we now live is miserable. For my part I know not whether is best, to live thus or to die out of hand. The grave is more easy for me than this dungeon." [2] Hopeful agrees with him. But when they had escaped from the castle and saw the beauty of the Delectable mountains, their souls were restored. Life was sweet in Emmanuel's land.

It is characteristic of Ecclesiastes to accept any light he can find in the causes of human misery. He will not create problems out of every trouble. If he can find the root of it, he will strike his finger on the place. This physician, the embodiment of science and sympathy, does not hesitate to say that we are the authors of much of our trouble. Trouble in the industrial world is largely

[1] iv. 2.

[2] *Pilgrim's Progress.*

caused by jealous rivalries.[1] Any form of life is preferable to feverish ambition to outshine your neighbour. It grasps at a shadow and misses any measure of peace and enjoyment this world affords. The beggar who folds his hands together, in passive acceptance of his lot, finds some satisfaction in the crust which he moistens in the stream.[2] Better is a handful of such enjoyment than two handfuls of labour without peace of mind. We see a picture of this man.[3] He is a solitary miser with everything heart can wish—yet he cannot call his soul his own. Without kith or kin, with no one he has blessed and no one to bless him, this slave of avarice never allows himself a moment to think. "For whom do I labour and bereave my soul of good?"

Ecclesiastes points to some of the blessings within the reach of every man. There are the joys of companionship. "Two are better than one." No one need travel through life alone. We are meant to be fellow-travellers, so that if we fall, the other will lift up his fellow. We shiver in a cold world without the warmth of friendship. And three are even better than two, for "a threefold cord is not quickly broken."

Political clouds overshadow him again.[4] His picture of political life has not been identified, but he has seen the rise and fall of revolution. Better is a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who does not

[1] iv. 4. [2] See *Gil Blas*, Book II. chap. viii. [3] iv. 7.

[4] iv. 13. "He does not believe that the world is getting worse and worse and hasting to its ruin (says Cheyne). He believes in revolutions, some for evil, some for good, some for 'rending' or 'breaking down,' others for 'sewing' or 'building up.' He believes, in other words, that God brings about recurrent changes in human circumstances. But he does not trust revolutions of human origin (Eccles. viii. 3). He is no Carbonaro (x. 20)" (Cheyne, *Job and Solomon*, p. 202).

discern the signs of the times. For this reason, a prisoner may ascend a throne, whilst a king may become a beggar in his own kingdom. Yet, this keen observer of life knows well the precariousness of all such dignities. Men worship the "rising sun." There is "no end of all the people" that flock around him. Then follows the crowning stroke of the irony of history: the idol of to-day is dethroned to-morrow and forgotten by the next generation. Such are the times in which he lives. The insecurity of life depresses him. This well-meaning "comforter" is at his wits' end again. He has considered oppression, wept with those that wept, struggled against a despairing mood. But he knows that he has failed to pierce the cloud and comfort the mourner. We still hear the plaintive cry, "They have no comforter . . . no comforter."

III

How can we comfort our fellow-men under all the oppressions that are done "under the sun"? Much human comfort intensifies pain. Job's "comforters" have gained immortal reproach. The theory that sin and suffering are in all cases connected cannot be harmonised with experience. The Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices—the eighteen upon whom the tower of Siloam fell were not sinners above all that dwelt in Jerusalem.[1] Stretched on the rack of this perverted theory of life, the Book of Job is the record of his magnificent struggle to free himself from his well-meaning tormentors. The mystery of life is increased by a dogmatism which fails to comprehend

[1] Luke xiii. 1.

that no one key can explain the anomalies of experience. The man who moralises

> With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
> Full of wise saws and modern instances

is a poor comforter. A placid temperament with a comfortable philosophy cannot enter into the feelings of a bewildered man. A mind stored with wisdom, neatly packed in proverbial size, coolly disposes of a complicated situation needing Infinite wisdom to unravel it, with an epigram! This was the real tragedy of Job. All such smooth explanations of life irritate a sensitive soul. "Moral judgments (says a keen observer of life [1]) must remain false and hollow unless they are checked and enlightened by a perpetual reference to the special circumstances that mark the individual lot. All people of broad strong sense have an instinctive repugnance to the men of maxims; because such people discern that the mysterious complexity of our life is not to be embraced by maxims, and that to lace ourselves up in formulas of that sort is to repress all the Divine promptings and inspirations that spring from growing insight and sympathy."

The only true comfort is companionship. "Two are better than one." It is the comfort which seeks to bear our burdens and carry our sorrows, which stretches out a helping hand when we fall, which does not shrink from close contact with loneliness and misery. This weaves the strands of that threefold cord which is stronger than hoops of steel! When Christian saved Hopeful from a fatal drowsiness in "the enchanted ground," Hopeful gratefully acknowledged the "com-

[1] George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, Book VII. chap. ii.

fort" of such a friend. "Had I been here alone, I had by sleeping run the danger of death. I see it is true that the wise man saith 'Two are better than one.' Thy company hath been my mercy." [1]

"We are three people, but only one soul," said Coleridge speaking of Wordsworth, Dorothy Wordsworth, and himself. That union was strength to at least one of the three. Coleridge was the weakest strand in the rope. It would have been well for himself if the three-fold cord had never been broken! Woe to him that is alone when he falleth, whose greatest enemy is himself! Coleridge is typical of human nature, richly endowed and capable of strong attachments, but weak, dependent, and liable to fall.

IV

How does God comfort? Divine comfort does not merely soothe and reconcile to circumstances. It ministers through human pity and help, through common justice and humanity, through judgment on all oppression. The Divine comforter creates a better understanding between class and mass, overcomes the spirit of jealousy and greed and touches the miser's heart. It creates that spiritual bond which is the only "three-fold cord" which can endure the strain of life. "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people," saith your God (beholding the tears of all that are oppressed); "behold the Lord God will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for Him. He shall feed His flock like a shepherd. He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom." [2] To comfort is a Divine task. "He saw that there was no man and wondered that there was no

[1] *Pilgrim's Progress.* [2] Isaiah xl.

intercessor: therefore his arm brought salvation. . . . In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved them." [1]

Jesus Christ is the comfort of God. He saw the tears of such as were oppressed. "Surely He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows." This Divine companionship saves us from loneliness in the darkest experience. By the road he travelled, Bethlehem, Nazareth, Jerusalem, Calvary, He tasted life and death with and for every man. "Of my visit to Coleridge, living then at Highgate," says John Stuart Blackie,[2] "I remember only two things: He was an old infirm down-bent man, and he told me he had thrown overboard all speculative philosophy, finding perfect satisfaction in the first chapter of the Gospel of John. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.'"

[1] Isaiah lxiii.

[2] *Notes of a Life*, chap. iii.

IX

WORSHIP

The man who does not wonder—who does not habitually wonder and worship, is but a pair of spectacles behind which there is no eye.

CARLYLE, *Sartor Resartus.*

Tho' my form be absent, my inner man goes constantly to Church. . . . Oh, I ought to have gone to Church! The bustle of the rising congregation reaches my ears. They are standing up to pray. Could I bring my heart into unison with those who are praying in yonder Church and lift it Heavenward . . . would not that be the safest kind of prayer? "Lord, look down upon me in mercy."

"Sunday at Home," HAWTHORNE'S *Twice-told Tales.*

Chapter V. *verses* 1-7.—Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God; for to draw nigh to hear is better than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they know not that they do evil. Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter anything before God; for God is in Heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few. For a dream cometh with a multitude of business; and a fool's voice with a multitude of words.

When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for He hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou vowest.

Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay. Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin; neither say thou before the angel, that it was an error: wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thine hands?

For thus it cometh to pass through the multitude of dreams and vanities and many words: but fear thou God.

Ecclesiastes has been called a pessimist, an agnostic, a materialist. His title to a place in the Bible at all has been regarded as dubious. We have followed him through days of gloom and disillusionment. We never dreamt that he was conducting us to the house of God, yet now we are standing in the porch! It does not matter what kind of a house it is. It may be a temple or a synagogue.[1] It is a place of worship. It is a place where money-making and pleasure-seeking are subordinate, where we all have our place, where we are not alone, where God is the supreme reality, where, if with all our hearts we truly seek Him, we shall ever surely find Him! And this is the resort of Ecclesiastes, the so-called man of the world![2] Amid all his doubts and perplexities he never lost reverence, never ceased to be a worshipper. In the loneliness of his experience he was never content to worship alone. You may be surprised to find this man, hardly orthodox in some of his ideas, standing with the conventional crowd, but he is here. The songs of Zion, the grand words of prophecy have not lost their spell. He cannot see his way; prayer may be only a sigh, a sob, but he will keep his heart open to God. "Ecclesiastes is a religious man, a reverent man; the fear of God is strong in his mind, but his religion is merely reflective. He has not that intense feeling of being in fellowship with a living

[1] "The house of God must, I think, mean the temple of Jerusalem. The synagogue would not be called 'house of God'" (Cheyne, *Job and Solomon*, p. 258).

[2] He lives not (I should suppose) in the country, but near the Temple, or at least has opportunities of frequenting it (see also viii. 10) (Cheyne).

person which Job and the Psalmist had, and which enabled them to force their way through the anomalies of Providence to the living God behind it or to open up as a religious necessity a world beyond death. Job appeals from God to God—from the God whom he identified with Providence to the God with whom his spirit had fellowship; but Ecclesiastes knows only the former God." [1] Ecclesiastes cannot forget his early training. He has outgrown childish ignorance and has little joy. Perhaps the world has been too much with him, but it has not robbed him of the child heart. Religion is the only tie which can clasp childhood to maturity, childish dreams to eternal realities.

> My heart leaps up when I behold
> A rainbow in the sky:
> So was it when my life began;
> So is it now I am a man;
> So be it when I shall grow old,
> Or let me die!
> The Child is father of the Man,
> And I could wish my days to be
> Bound each to each by natural piety.[2]

Ecclesiastes, rarely emotional, never able to see a ladder between Heaven and earth, is still a worshipper.

I

Ecclesiastes has some affinity with that Psalmist, "whose steps had well-nigh slipped." [3] That man saw no light on his experience, and thought was too painful for him until he went into the sanctuary of God. Then he saw life in a new light, and was able to join heartily

[1] Davidson, *Book by Book*, p. 190.
[2] Wordsworth.
[3] Psalm lxxiii.

in public worship. But Ecclesiastes, who lived in darker days, only saw his way in "a dim religious light." He has no rapture—he is a melancholy man in the house of God. Yet, as he worships, some vision comes to him which restores his soul. The grand music touches deep chords of memory. He is no formalist. He sees the "vanity" of all religious observance which does not rise from the spirit. The religious life of his day had those germs of formalism and casuistry which afterwards developed into Pharisaism. Regarding worship from his own peculiar standpoint, he has ideas which make him our teacher to-day.

(*a*) First of all, he sees that worship begins before we enter the house of God: "keep thy foot when thou goest." It expresses a reverent attitude of mind. Private worship begins before public worship. Everything depends on the spirit in which we approach the house of God. What is our idea of worship? Ecclesiastes cannot improve on the old teaching which he echoes here: to obey is better than to sacrifice.[1] The meaning and value of worship are determined on our way to the house of God. "Two men went up to the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, the other a publican." One has no sense of sin; the other is burdened with it. Their prayers are the exact index of their thoughts. The Pharisee's prayer is a brief advertisement of his own virtues. The publican could not lift up so much as his eyes to Heaven.

Ecclesiastes, like George Herbert, hesitates at the porch of the temple.

> Let vain and busie thoughts have there no part,
> Bring not thy plough, thy plots, thy pleasures thither.

[1] 1 Samuel xv. 22.

Christ purg'd His Temple; so must thou thy heart,
All worldly thoughts are but thieves met together.[1]

(*b*) Now we come into the house of God. "Be not rash with thy mouth." Public worship is not having a chat with the Almighty—not giving our Creator information—not attributing to Him our thoughts and moods—not a rush of words with no thought behind them. "Do not multiply words. Keep a watch on the words of thy lips and on the meditations of thy heart. Thou art a child of earth and in presence of the God of Heaven. He is above and we are upon earth, therefore it behoveth our words to be wary and few."[2]

Ecclesiastes enforces his meaning with a picture from life: "A dream cometh thro' the multitude of business."[3] The business man goes home but not to rest. His brain is in a whirl—he cannot escape from the distractions of the day. Surging thoughts create dreams which haunt the hours of the night. This fevered, incoherent state is like the state of the worshipper at the mercy of feeling. He does not know what he is saying. His prayers are such "stuff as dreams are made of." Here is comfort for the man suffering from pressure of business as well as warning to the man who can pray fluently. Prayer is not a matter of words at all; therefore let thy words be few. "There is no need to say much to God. One often does not talk much to a friend whom one is delighted to see; one enjoys looking at him, and one says some few words which are purely matters of feeling. One does not so much seek interchange of thought as rest and communion of heart

[1] G. Herbert, *The Temple*—"The Church Porch."
[2] Hooker, *Ecclesiastical Polity*, Book I. ii. [3] v. 3.

with one's friend. Even so it should be with God—a word, a sigh, a thought, a feeling, says everything." [1]

Prayer is the soul's sincere desire
Uttered or unexpressed—
The motion of a hidden fire
That trembles in the breast.[2]

(*c*) Public worship is over. "Keep thy foot when thou goest from the house of God." The true worshipper does not leave the house of God the same man as when he entered it. He may be "a sadder and a wiser man," but in any case he is not disobedient to the heavenly vision. Emotion must be translated into conduct before it becomes religion. "When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it." The good resolution—the touch of pity—the merciful judgment inspired in the house of God represent solemn vows. Vows demand immediate payment. Emotion, cooled down, hardens the heart, and good intentions unfulfilled may become as hard as pavement!

Ecclesiastes draws another picture from life. A man under the stress of emotion has made a vow. In a cooler moment he regrets it. He mistook a softened heart for a religious experience. How can he evade payment? He is explaining to the "angel" or priest why his contribution is less in value than his vow or why he is postponing payment indefinitely. "It is an error," [3] he says, by which he really means a temporary lapse from that habitual prudence which has prevented him from ever doing a generous thing before. He is a smart man and has cleverly wriggled out of his obliga-

[1] Fénelon, *Letters to Men*, xxii. [2] Montgomery.

[3] v. 6. This meaning of the "angel" is supported by Malachi iii. 1, where the priest is called "the messenger" of Jehovah.

tion. He is so much more in pocket. But what is such a man in God's sight? What a miserable travesty of religion! I see a rare flash of passion in Ecclesiastes in the rhetorical question: "Wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thy hands?"

(*d*) Ecclesiastes turns away from religionism—dreamy, wordy, inconsistent—to true religion: "In the multitude of dreams and words there are many vanities: but fear thou God."[1] "With these solemn words he who has spoken by turns in the character of the sick and disillusioned searcher after knowledge; of the pessimistic and life-weary sigher after annihilation; of the despairing fatalist; of the sad Agnostic; of the hopeless materialist . . . rises at last to the full stature of the Preacher if not of filial trust and faith, yet of reverence and awe. It is not Christian faith, it is not the soul 'athirst for God, even the living God,' but it is something beyond the reach of those whom in many ways he so resembles, with whom he has in many points such sympathy, those who say aloud or in their hearts 'there is no God.'"[2] He comes back to the old faith of peasants and children in Judah, to fear God and keep His commandments. He had learnt it in the Bethel of his childhood. Life had robbed him of many illusions. He had passed through bitter experiences. But he had never given up his place in the house of God, and now it was as an anchor to his soul. He falls back on the faith of his fathers. The heart which had leapt up at the sight of the rainbow in the sky still saw a rainbow through his tears. The child was father of the Man. The days of childhood and the dark days of later experience were

[1] v. 7. [2] Bradley, *Lecture on Ecclesiastes*, vii.

bound each to each by ties of natural piety which could never be broken.

II

Many people become estranged from the house of God when their experience becomes complicated. As the mystery of life deepens we are tempted to give up our place in a society where faith in God has survived all mysteries. We associate public worship with smooth religious language so different from a discordant life. But loneliness and bewilderment make their appeal to God as much as any confession of faith. The house of God is the place in which to seek light on our problems quite as much as to claim promises and offer prayers. The man who has lost his way, with no heart to sing, should never feel out of place here, where the sacrifices of God are a broken and a contrite heart.

Few can worship alone without loss. The greatest souls need a wider view, a richer experience than their own. If Elijah had worshipped with the seven thousand who did not bow the knee to Baal, he would never have made the mistake of thinking "I, even I only, am left to be jealous for the Lord God of Hosts."[1] John Milton gave up the habit of public worship.[2] There is something grand in his independent spirit, yet it darkened his religious outlook. And the modern Elijah, Thomas Carlyle, would never have been found sitting in despair under his juniper tree if he had shared more fully the experience of those whose spirit was as zealous as his own.

Many causes may estrange us from the house of

[1] 1 Kings xix. 10.

[2] Pattison, *Life of Milton* (English Men of Letters), p. 152.

God. Emerson heard a preacher who sorely tempted him to go to church no more. "A snow-storm was falling. The snow-storm was very real—the preacher merely spectral. He had no one word intimating that he had laughed or wept. He had read books, his head had ached and his heart throbbed; yet there was not a hint in his discourse that he had ever lived at all." Benjamin Franklin heard a sermon on a Sunday in 1733 which led to his withdrawal from public worship.[1] It was an exposition of the words: "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true . . . honest . . . just . . . pure . . . lovely . . . of good report . . . think on these things."[2] The Apostle simply meant five things, said the preacher: "Keeping holy the Sabbath day, reading the Bible, public worship, partaking of the Sacrament, paying a due respect to God's ministers." "These might be all good things," says Franklin, "but they were not the kind of things I expected from that text." "It is my misfortune," said Nathaniel Hawthorne, "seldom to fructify in a regular way by any but printed sermons. The first strong idea which the preacher utters gives birth to a train of thought and leads me onward step by step quite out of hearing of the good man's voice . . . at my open window catching now and then a sentence of the 'parson's saw,' I am as well situated as at the foot of the pulpit stairs."[3]

We are bound to sympathise with these experiences, yet these representative utterances all miss the real grounds for entering the house of God as emphasised by Ecclesiastes. It is to worship God, it is to have the individual experience strengthened by and merged into

[1] Autobiography, *Everyman's Library*, p. 97.
[2] Philippians iv. 8.
[3] *Twice-told Tale.*

the corporate experience of the Church. There is room in the house of God for every man.

> For the love of God is broader
> Than the measures of man's mind,
> And the heart of the Eternal
> Is most wonderfully kind.

X

THE SORROWS OF THE RICH

What shall I do ? (the rich man's question).
St. Luke xii. 17.

a glistering grief,
. . . a golden sorrow.
King Henry VIII.

Chapter V. *verse* 8 to end of Chapter VI.—If thou seest the oppression of the poor, and the violent taking away of judgment and justice in a province, marvel not at the matter: for one higher than the high regardeth; and there be higher than they.

Moreover the profit of the earth is for all: the king himself is served by the field. He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this also is vanity. When goods increase, they are increased that eat them: and what advantage is there to the owner thereof, saving the beholding of them with his eyes ?

The sleep of a labouring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much: but the fulness of the rich will not suffer him to sleep. There is a grievous evil which I have seen under the sun: riches kept by the owner thereof to his hurt: and those riches perish by evil adventure; and if he hath begotten a son, there is nothing in his hand. As he came forth of his mother's womb, naked shall he go again as he came, and shall take nothing for his labour which he may carry away in his hand. And this also is a grievous evil, that in all points as he came so shall he go: and what profit hath he that he laboureth for the wind ? All his

days also he eateth in darkness, and he is sore vexed and hath sickness and wrath.

Behold, that which I have seen to be good and to be comely is for one to eat and to drink, and to enjoy good in all his labour, wherein he laboureth under the sun, all the days of his life which God hath given him: for this is his portion. Every man also to whom God hath given riches and wealth, and hath given him power to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour; this is the gift of God.

For he shall not much remember the days of his life, because God answereth him in the joy of his heart.

Chapter VI.—There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it is heavy upon men: a man to whom God giveth riches, wealth, and honour, so that he lacketh nothing for his soul of all that he desireth, yet God giveth him not power to eat thereof, but a stranger eateth it; this is vanity, and it is an evil disease. If a man beget an hundred children, and live many years, so that the days of his years be many, but his soul be not filled with good, and moreover he have no burial;—I say, that an untimely birth is better than he. For it cometh in vanity and departeth in darkness, and the name thereof is covered with darkness. Moreover it hath not seen the sun nor known it; this hath rest rather than the other. Yea, though he live a thousand years twice told, and yet enjoy no good: do not all go to one place?

All the labour of man is for his mouth, and yet the appetite is not filled. For what advantage hath the wise more than the fool? or what hath the poor man, that knoweth to walk before the living?

Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire: this also is vanity and a striving after wind. Whatsoever hath been, the name thereof was given long ago, and it is known that it is man[1]; neither can he contend with him that is mightier than he. Seeing there be many things that increase vanity, what is man the better? For who knoweth what is good for man in his life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? For who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?

[1] Margin, "Adam."

Palestine had been a land of small peasant proprietors. The institution of the Jubilee was intended to prevent the acquisition of large estates by any Israelite. "Much food is in the tillage of the poor," ran the proverb. It was the tillage of the poor, the careful diligent husbandry of the man with a little patch to cultivate, that filled the storehouses of Palestine. What a contrast to this happy condition is the picture drawn by Ecclesiastes! Under Persian misrule the poor were the prey of the rich. The satrap stood at the head of state officers, and he fleeced the province for his own benefit. Over the satrap were inspectors who often built up their fortunes in mysterious ways. Over all stood the king and the court with its rivalry of intrigue and faction.

It is noticeable that when Ecclesiastes speaks of the signs of the times, his language is often obscure. This was probably deliberate. He has something of the respect the Apostle Paul had for "the powers that be": freedom of speech is not always advisable. His word to the wise is designedly vague, and he leaves much to private interpretation. We may accept his allusion to the state of affairs as a guarded way of saying, "Don't be surprised if small officials plunder. The same thing goes on up the social scale. If the king is higher than the highest,[1] he, in turn, is ruled by those below him." Such was the social condition under Persian or Greek misrule.

I

Ecclesiastes is in touch with all classes. He sees the difficulties and temptations common to every grade of

[1] v. 8 (A.V.).

society. He is no partisan, and takes a broad view of the situation. He can sympathise with rich and poor, and has no idea of levelling society up or down. He has no pet social scheme. He does not attach blessedness to poverty or wealth, because he knows that happiness is not to be found in any circumstances. In the previous chapter he considered the oppressed. He saw their tears—that they had no comforter. Now he turns to the upper classes of society and considers "the sorrows of the rich." He cannot help contrasting the misery of his time with a patriarchal government when the king drew his revenue not from oppressive taxes but from agriculture, the true source of wealth. They were happier days when the king was "devoted to the field." [1] Ecclesiastes does not think that the golden age is in the past.[2] He is only concerned with those principles which are the same under all conditions. He lays down that law which lies at the basis of life: "He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver." [3] Ruskin points out that this phrase "a lover of silver" is the common word for "covetous" in the New Testament.[4] It is this love which is the root of all evil. Ecclesiastes does not exactly say that. I detect a real note of sympathy with the rich. He has been in a position to understand the harassing anxieties which accompany the possession of wealth, and his picturesque language creates scenes from life which appeal to us to-day. "When goods increase, they are increased that eat them." [5] The poor man is happy with one servant or none at all. The rich man has fifty. He is the same man, with the same limited appetite, and only occupies

[1] v. 9. [2] See vii. 10. [3] v. 10.
[4] *On the Old Road*, ii. 162. [5] v. 11.

the same room in the world. But everything around him is on a bigger scale. He lives in a bigger house, and his own meal is only a slice off the provisions for which he has the privilege of paying. "Do you think, Sacian, that I live with the more pleasure the more I possess?" replied Pheraulas to the young man who envied his newly-acquired wealth. "Do you not know that I neither eat nor drink nor sleep with a particle more pleasure now than when I was poor? By having this abundance I gain merely this, that I have to guard more, to distribute more, and to have the trouble of taking care of more . . . so that I seem to myself in possessing abundance to have more afflictions than I had before in possessing so little."[1] We see the rich landowner tossing on his bed whilst those dependent upon him sleep without a care.[2] Can we forget the soliloquy of the sleepless king envying the ship boy rocked in the cradle of the deep?[3]

Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.

The next picture recalls the vicissitudes of Job. Wealth laboriously acquired is swept away by a reverse of fortune.[4] Ecclesiastes cannot rise to Job's sublime resignation: "The Lord gave, the Lord hath taken away: blessed be the name of the Lord." But he does not charge God foolishly. He is grimly resigned to the final disillusionment of death, and accepts the truth which stares every man in the face: "We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out."[5]

[1] Xenophon, *Cyrop.* viii. 3, quoted by Ginsburg.
[2] v. 12.
[3] *2 King Henry IV.* Act iii. Sc. 1.
[4] v. 14.
[5] 1 Timothy vi. 7.

II

These reflections on the vanity of human wishes have become proverbial. The wisdom of Ecclesiastes is that he is not carried away either to utter rhapsodies about the blessings of poverty or that depreciation of wealth with which we are equally familiar. The love of money may be the root of all evil, but wealth, like everything else, is the gift of God. He does not envy the labourer any more than the rich man. Blessedness is not in the state of poverty or wealth. Rich and poor are dependent upon God—both have their joys and sorrows. He is driven back again to the old conclusion.[1] If a man has little, let him enjoy it: if a man has much, let him enjoy it. It is both good and beautiful to eat and drink and enjoy the fruit of labour.[2] But whether life is blessed or not depends upon the individual. Money cannot buy a restful spirit, cannot create the joy of life. The secret of life is to accept everything from God. He returns to the sense of dependence on the Divine bounty as he has done before. Life itself and the goods of life, few or many, and the power to enjoy them, are all alike God's gifts.[3] The man who has learnt this secret does not brood over memories, and is not over-anxious. The joy of his heart is God's answer to a peaceful conscience, and this is the only true success in life.[4] Ecclesiastes uses the happy phrase "God answereth him in the joy of his heart," which may mean that the blessedness of God corresponds to the blessedness of a heart full of joy.

It is characteristic of Ecclesiastes to return to the same theme even when he seems to have reached a final

[1] See ii. 24, iii. 22.
[2] v. 18.
[3] See also ii. 24, iii. 13.
[4] v. 20.

conclusion. He has not yet mastered his moods. He is still obsessed by the thought of the sorrows of the rich. Here is a man to whom God has given riches and treasures and honour.[1] He has everything heart can wish, but he just lacks one thing: the capacity for enjoying it all. He is a lonely man without kith or kin, and when he dies a stranger steps into his shoes. Then look at a picture the exact opposite of that.[2] The rich man is surrounded by his family—children and grandchildren. What more can he want? He lacks the joy of life. He is haunted by the thought that he may not be buried in the sepulchre of his fathers, and that casts a shadow over everything. The still-born child who never sees the sun has more rest than this unhappy man.[3]

Ecclesiastes has now traversed the circle of his thoughts and returns to his starting-point—to that law of life which is the same under all conditions. "All the labour of man is for his mouth, and yet the appetite is not satisfied." Happiness, blessedness, or whatever you call the *summum bonum*, is not to be found in circumstances. What hath the wise more than the fool? What advantage hath the poor over the rich in the art of living?[4] No condition of life ensures peace of mind. Happiness must be found within.

III

How does Ecclesiastes prove a "comforter" to the rich? He comforts in two ways: first, by an appeal to experience, and then by an appeal to Scripture.

(*a*) "Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering

[1] vi. 1. [2] vi. 3.
[3] vi. 3-5. See Plumptre's comment, *Cambridge Bible*, "Ecclesiastes." [4] vi. 8.

of the soul." [1] Martin Luther's rendering is probably the best: "It is better to enjoy the present good than to think about other good." Proverbial wisdom embodies this truth in the fable of the dog and his shadow, and the maxim "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." But Ecclesiastes is not a mere maxim-monger. He speaks from a full experience. Had not his own soul wandered through the Universe only to return home weary and dissatisfied? Had he not found more happiness in gazing on his present opportunities than in all his roving excursions in search of the unknown? To enjoy what we have is infinitely better than to be at the mercy of those limitless desires which make man for ever a restless being. Better one day's honest living than years of wandering after the unknown and unattainable. Better to live to-day than indulge in any beautiful dream of living to-morrow.

> Happy the man and happy he alone,
> He who can call to-day his own,
> He who, in spite of fate, can say,
> "To-morrow do thy worst, for I have lived to-day." [2]

"You may paddle all day long," wrote a wanderer,[3] "but it is when you come back at nightfall and look in at the familiar room that you find Love or Death awaiting you beside the stove; and the most beautiful adventures are not those we go to seek." Ecclesiastes does not promise that either Love or Death shall be awaiting the wanderer at home; but he promises more satisfaction in making the best of what we see and have than in "looking before and after, and pining for what is not." This is a message to the rich. Let the rich man learn the lesson

[1] vi. 9.

[2] Horace, *Ode* 29, trans. by Dryden.

[3] R. L. Stevenson.

of contentment. If his wealth cannot purchase a happy home, it can harmonise with homeliness and a wise acceptance of a distinct limit to wants and their supply.

(*b*) The "comfort" of Ecclesiastes goes deeper still—to the roots of our life. "That which hath been is named already, and it is known that he is Adam: neither may he contend with him that is mightier than he."[1] Some read these words as the language of fatalism. Man is the creature of a destiny which he cannot resist. Long ago his name and fate were fixed, and he cannot contend against an Almighty decree. But there are quite sufficient reasons for rejecting this interpretation.[2] There is no doctrine of rigid fatalism taught in this book. Ecclesiastes is not discussing the eternity of Divine decrees in a sense which excludes freedom and responsibility. He is dwelling on the shortness of man's life rather than its subjection to destiny. We are bound to accept another explanation. Man is not a god, not a Titan. He is mortal with immortal desires. But "Adam" is the name and place God has given us—"Adam," a creature of the dust, with boundless desires, but frail and dependent. This is man's name whether he be rich or poor. It brings us all back to our common dependence upon God. The rich and poor meet together; the Lord is the Maker of them all.

IV

Ecclesiastes is not ashamed of his name and station in life. He accepts both, as he reads again the lesson he

[1] vi. 10 (see margin of the Revised Version, "Adam").

[2] See Plumptre for these reasons, *Cambridge Bible*, "Ecclesiastes," p. 158.

learnt in childhood. "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul."[1] He may not fully know what is good for man in this life. The past is irrevocable, the present wrapped in mystery, the future all unknown. He cannot contend with Death, mightier than he. But he knows this: he is Adam—no greater, no less. This lowly origin rebukes all pride, "the frantic boast and foolish word"—

> man, proud man,
> Drest in a little brief authority,
> Most ignorant of what he's most assured,
> His glassy essence, like an angry ape,
> Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
> As make the angels weep.[2]

Yet man, though he may act like an angry ape, can never be less than Adam. Perhaps the most precious of all Job's experiences was that, in all his humiliation, he had never forfeited the Divine respect. "Gird thyself like a man!"[3] Do you call that a man—crouching on a bed of ashes—scraping himself with a potsherd, crushed by circumstances, the butt of relentless criticism! Yes, a man every inch of him. Job had sunk lower than a worm in his own eyes, but he had never sunk lower than a man in God's sight. Job! thou hast lost everything but thy manhood, but none can rob thee of that but thyself!

> Stand up!
> Thou art the peer of any man
> Who moves the human mass among!
> As much a part of the great plan
> Which in Creation's dawn began
> As any of the throng!

[1] Genesis ii. 7. [2] *Measure for Measure.* [3] Job xxxviii. 3.

The wise acceptance of our name and station in life has been expressed in the Old Testament and the New. "Two things have I required of Thee: deny me not before I die. Remove far from me vanity and lies: Give me neither poverty nor riches: Feed me with food convenient for me: Lest I be full and deny Thee and say, Who is the Lord? Or lest I be poor and steal, and take the name of my God in vain." [1] "Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, to be self-sufficing. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: everywhere and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." [2]

[1] Prayer of Agur, Proverbs xxx. 7.
[2] The Apostle Paul, Philippians iv.

XI

MELIORISM

"I don't know that I ever heard anybody use the word 'meliorist' except myself."

GEORGE ELIOT (*Life*, edited by J. W. Cross, ii. 437).

Chapter VII. *verses* 1-14.—A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death than the day of one's birth.

It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart.

Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made glad.

The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise than for a man to hear the song of fools.

For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool: this also is vanity.

Surely extortion maketh a wise man foolish, and a gift destroyeth the understanding.

Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof: and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.

Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry: for anger resteth in the bosom of fools.

Say not thou, What is the cause that the former days were better than these? for thou dost not inquire wisely concerning this.

Wisdom is as good as an inheritance: yea, more excellent is it for them that see the sun.

For wisdom is a defence, even as money is a defence: but the excellency of knowledge is, that wisdom preserveth the life of him that hath it.

Consider the work of God: for who can make that straight which he hath made crooked?

In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God hath even made the one side by side with the other, to the end that man should not find out anything that shall be after him.

THIS chapter begins the second part of the book. The first part is the revelation of a soul grappling with the mystery of life. He is "under a cloud" due to the times in which he lives, his defective sense of God and a melancholy cast of mind. His worst difficulty is probably himself, with a brooding nature, disposed to take dark views of life. But he is brave and will not submit to the tyranny of temperament. If he cannot be an optimist, he will not be a pessimist.[1] The stage he has now reached is a temporary resting-place looking back on the hill he has climbed, looking forward to finer views. The road winds uphill all the way. His journey will take the whole day long—from morn to night. But he knows the worst. With his wide experience of life, his candid estimate of wealth and fame and pleasure, he has already arrived at some half-way conclusions. The thoughts he has turned over and over again in his mind have gained a certain epigrammatic shape, and many of them are in currency

[1] "He has often been called a pessimist; but that is a misnomer, because he has an intense conviction that mankind ought to be and could be better if circumstances were more favourable. His sadness would not be so deep if his estimation of the potentialities of goodness in man were less high" (M'Neile, Introduction, p. 15).

to-day. Ecclesiastes does not go to extremes. At one time he may have partaken of every dish at the feast, but the reaction from that indulgence did not lead him to the extreme of refusing to be sociable. He knows well the evils of his time, but he will not solace himself by any comparison of an imaginary golden age in the past.[1] He has simply learnt to say of many things, "It is better to do this than that." He has become a "meliorist."[2] Meliorism is the state of mind which avoids extremes. It is rarely enthusiastic, but it can see compensation when others only see losses, and if it cannot make the best, it will not make the worst—it makes "the better" of life.

I

Precious ointment to the Oriental mind was a type of its rich fragrant life. Ecclesiastes, whose thoughts rise to higher things, speaks of something better: "a good name is better than precious ointment." Character is better than all other possessions. There is no ascetic disapproval of perfumes, but the discovery of a sweeter fragrance. The best commentary on these words was made by a woman who broke an alabaster box of ointment, very costly, and lavished it upon her Lord. Some called it "waste," but the fragrance of that uncalculating act of love has sweetened the world and given Mary of Bethany an immortal name. When Ecclesiastes goes on to say, "and the day of death than the day of one's birth,"[3] he does not say that death is better than

[1] vii. 10.

[2] Cheyne prefers to call Koheleth a "malist." "He is no pessimist, but he lacks the imaginative faculty to sympathise with the Utopian prospects for the future contained in the prophetic visions" (*Job and Solomon*, p. 102).

[3] vii. 1.

life, which is sheer pessimism. He is capable of such moods [1] in common with others who may have come under the influence of Buddhist teaching. Herodotus [2] relates that the Trausi, a Thracian tribe, met on the birth of a child and bewailed the woes which were its inevitable portion, whilst they buried their dead with joy, because they had fallen to eternal sleep. Ecclesiastes rises above that settled pessimism. We ought to connect the contrast between birth and death with "a good name." The two thoughts hang closely together. This connection reminds us of that saying attributed to Solon,[3] that no man is to be counted happy until he has ended life happily. Death crowns a "good name" with a lustre which never belongs to the living.

And now we learn something more of the secret of the triumph of Ecclesiastes over temperament. He has not been shut up in himself. He has lived among his fellow-men, been to the house of feasting and the house of mourning, "wept with those that wept and rejoiced with those that rejoiced." He has listened to the wise and accepted their rebuke. He has listened to frivolous talk and jesting till it has sounded like "crackling nettles under kettles." [4] He has seen all aspects of life, and it has saved him from taking one-sided views. This is his conclusion: When I think of my fellow-men as I have seen them, feasting and mourning, laughing and crying, thoughtful and jocular, I know where I have seen life at its deepest and best. There is a time to laugh and a time to weep, a time to dance and a time to mourn, but to get below the surface of things you must face the realities of life. It is good

[1] ii. 17.
[2] Herodotus v. 4.
[3] Herodotus i. 32.
[4] vii. 6 (Plumptre).

to go to the house of feasting. It is better to go to the house of mourning. It is this way of facing all the experiences of life which makes the wisdom and bravery of Ecclesiastes.[1] Many of us, with far more light on the mysteries of life and death, shrink from any close contact with either. We look at the house of mourning, but we do not go in. We pity the fatherless and widow in their affliction, but we do not visit them. When we read these words we become suspicious of some attempt to rob us of cherished possessions—our cheerful prospects and rosy optimism.[2]

Ecclesiastes does not speak as a mourner but a comforter. We instinctively respect the philosophy of sorrow. "Sorrow remarries us to God," said Dante. "A man's work is not done upon earth so long as God has anything for him to suffer," said Frederick William Robertson. Ecclesiastes speaks as one who has deliberately visited this school and learnt something which has made him a better man. He has faced the realities and seen life and death without a mask. "This is one reason among others why it is so good to be in the house of mourning," says Dora Greenwell with her usual quick insight.[3] "It is there more easy to be natural—to be true, I mean, to that which is deepest within us. Is there not something in the daily familiar course of life which seems in a strange way to veil its true aspect? It is not death but life which wraps us about with shroud and cerement." Without reverence for the realities, life is poor indeed. If we have lost it in the

[1] These sayings (says Cheyne) supply a convincing proof that Koheleth was not a mere Epicurean. Resignation is the secret of inward peace: "with a sad face the heart may be cheerful."

[2] "Our sadness is not sad but our cheap joys," says Thoreau (quoted by Cheyne).

[3] *Two Friends*, p. 38.

house of feasting we may thank God if we recover it in the house of mourning. In many ways we may gain by the visit, but the higher purpose is to give. It is good to receive, but the greatest of all Comforters said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."[1] In the house of mourning we may have the blessedness which comes from forgetting ourselves. The fatherless and the widow can give us nothing, but in blessing them we shall be blessed.

II

Ecclesiastes leaves the house of mourning in a meditative mood. How much mourning is caused by sin! The evil times weigh upon him. They are times of bribery and corruption, when oppression and bribery work "like madness in the brain" of all wise men. But in the school of experience, he has learnt patience. The oppressor has not said the last word: "Better is the end of a thing than the beginning."[2] This is not at all self-evident, and we wonder whether this maxim is uttered in a despairing or a hopeful tone. Is this the utterance of a man who has seen so many disappointments, so many ships going out of port with flying flags and foundering at sea, that he thinks nothing good till it ends well? Or is this an expression of faith in the ultimate triumph of all true beginnings, however chequered the course may be? We can safely accept the second interpretation in view of the conviction which follows, that "the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit." It is only faith in God which can keep a man cool in the presence of ascendant evil. Ecclesiastes is somewhat provoked by those who cannot

[1] Acts xx. 35. [2] vii. 8.

share his faith, who talk as though the world had seen its best days. They compared past and present, idealising the past, whilst they left out the future. "Say not thou," he cries, "Why is it that the former days were better than these? Thou dost not enquire wisely concerning this."[1] Ecclesiastes deprecates the backward look. All times have their peculiar difficulties. But human nature ever casts "longing lingering looks behind." In those days they spoke of the "golden age" of Solomon. Greece looked back to Marathon and Thermopylae; Rome under the Empire recalled the vanished glory of the Republic; modern retrospect has the same wistfulness in its gaze. "Carlyle," said Maurice, "believes in a God, who lived till the death of Oliver Cromwell." In the same spirit William Morris idealised the Middle Ages and the life depicted in the Sagas of Iceland.

We have much to learn from former days, but it is the truest wisdom to believe that the Past is dependent upon the Present. "These all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some 'better' thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect."[2] The Past is no high standard of excellence to which the Present must attain. The Past is dependent upon the Present to realise its hopes—to justify its faith—to secure that "there shall never be one lost good"—that "all men have willed or hoped or dreamed of good shall exist." It is the law of life. The dumb poetry of William Burns, the father, was made perfect in Robert Burns, the son. Erasmus Darwin was made perfect in Charles Darwin. Hubert Herkomer had that "better" thing,

[1] vii. 10. [2] Hebrews xi.

which perfected the art of his father and uncle. The root of pessimism—of looking back and not forward—is lack of faith. The golden age is not in the past, but hidden in the

> far-off Divine event
> To which the whole creation moves.

III

Ecclesiastes has learnt something of this wisdom, and he says "it is as good as an inheritance."[1] With characteristic frankness he compares wisdom with money: wisdom is a defence—money is a defence. Which is better? "The excellency of knowledge is that wisdom giveth life to those that have it." This wisdom had taught Ecclesiastes to value a good name above all other possessions; to see the blessedness of giving; to control hastiness of spirit, and to believe in better days. Now he recurs to a thought which confronted him at the beginning of his quest:[2] Who can make that straight which He hath made crooked? He had once uttered these words in a tone of resignation to the inevitable, and some still interpret them to mean a passive acceptance of things as they are. It is surely more in harmony with the wisdom "which giveth life to those that have it" to ignore this fatalistic interpretation. There is a better meaning. Ecclesiastes is wiser than he was, with that wisdom which is not merely resigned to circumstances, but adapts itself to them. When circumstances over which we have no control are adverse, when they cross and thwart our purposes, when we cannot understand why God permits them, it is idle to wish things were different; to fret and struggle

[1] vii. 11. [2] i. 15.

against them. The wise man who "considers God's work" submits to His will and makes the best (or the better) of the conditions He has appointed. The Stoic made a brave attempt to do the same. It is expressed in the noble hymn of Cleanthes to Zeus:

> Thou alone knowest how to change the odd
> To even, and to make the crooked straight,
> And things discordant find accord in Thee.[1]

But to the Stoic Zeus was too closely identified with the "Law of the Universe" to be a personal Providence. Ecclesiastes had been taught by a wiser schoolmaster, and never quite lost those early impressions of a Divine purpose in harmony with human freedom. This inspires his message to greet and not to crouch under circumstances.[2] If you do this, neither adversity nor prosperity will be wasted upon you. You will be joyful in the day of prosperity, and you will find the "sweet uses of adversity." More than that you will discern some "rhyme and reason" in the mixed experiences of life. You will come to see this: "God also hath set the one over against the other to the end that man should find nothing after him."[3] There is a law of averages in the distribution of dark and sunny days, a balancing of "this against that" which is in wiser hands than ours. We cannot foretell the future. Sufficient unto the day is the evil or the good. But our ignorance of the future is no reason why we should

[1] Plumptre's translation, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 166.

[2] vii. 14. "Greet the unseen with a cheer" (Epilogue to "Asolando." R. Browning).

[3] "What is meant by this (says Delitzsch) is that God causes man to experience good and evil that he may pass through the whole school of life." If this is so, it gives some warmth to Koheleth's conception of God.

not thankfully enjoy the boon of life and intelligence which God has given us.

IV

The guesses at truth of a "meliorist" may put us on the track of great discoveries.

> What though the radiance which was once so bright
> Be now for ever taken from my sight,
> Though nothing can bring back the hour
> Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
> We will grieve not, rather find
> Strength in what remains behind;
> In the primal sympathy
> Which having been must ever be;
> In the soothing thoughts that spring
> Out of human suffering;
> In the faith that looks through death,
> In years that bring the philosophic mind.[1]

The Christian "meliorist" does not brood over the days beyond recall. He finds strength in the "primal sympathy" with every type of human need and suffering. He does not look back but forward, with a piercing faith which "looks through" life and death to the eternal realities. The Christian philosophic mind faces the future calmly, free from the idle dreams of pessimism or optimism. The blending and balancing of conditions of life is not fatalism. It speaks of the "work of God." The wonderful opposition of "this against that, sunshine against shadow, life against death, prosperity against adversity," is not the action of a distant unknown Creator working out mathematically a law of averages. It is the mysterious loving purpose of our Heavenly Father. "His way is in the sea and His path in the

[1] Wordsworth, "Intimations of Immortality."

great waters, and His footsteps are not known," yet "He leads Israel like a flock." [1] He has set over against the mystery of life His Providential way in history and individual experience. He has set the New Testament over against the Old, so that we should know that thinkers and seekers after God did not think and seek in vain. He has set a Gospel which brings "life and immortality to light" over against all the speculations of human philosophy. He has set over against Ecclesiastes the revelation of His heart and will in Jesus Christ. The Christian meliorist, if he cannot rise to ecstasy of faith, can still wonder at the marvellous ways of God, and even sing in the day of adversity :

All's well !
The clouds which rise with thunder, slake
Our thirsty souls with rain ;
The blow most dreaded falls to break
From off our limbs a chain ;
And wrongs of man to man but make
The love of God more plain.[2]

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[1] Ps. lxxvii. [2] Whittier.

XII

THE TRIUMPH OVER CYNICISM

Doth Job fear God for nought ?
Job i. 9.

The most lost cynic will get a new heart by learning thoroughly to believe in the virtue of one man.
SEELEY, *Ecce Homo.*

Chapter VII. *verses* 15 to end.—All this have I seen in the days of my vanity: there is a righteous man that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man that prolongeth his life in his evil-doing. Be not righteous overmuch; neither make thyself over wise: why shouldest thou destroy thyself? Be not overmuch wicked, neither be thou foolish: why shouldest thou die before thy time? It is good that thou shouldest take hold of this; yea, also from that withdraw not thine hand: for he that feareth God shall come forth of them all. Wisdom is a strength to the wise man more than ten rulers which are in a city. Surely there is not a righteous man upon earth, that doeth good and sinneth not. Also take not heed unto all words that are spoken; lest thou hear thy servant curse thee: for oftentimes also thine own heart knoweth that thou thyself likewise hast cursed others. All this have I proved in wisdom: I said, I will be wise, but it was far from me. That which is is far off, and exceeding deep; who can find it out? I turned about, and my heart was set to know and to search out, and to seek wisdom and the reason (of things), and to know that wickedness is folly, and that foolishness is madness. And I find a thing more bitter than death, even the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and her hands as bands: whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her, but the sinner shall be taken by her. Behold, this have I found, saith the

Preacher, laying one thing to another, to find out the account: which my soul still seeketh, but I have not found: one man among a thousand have I found; but a woman among all those have I not found. Behold, this only have I found, that God made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions.

Ecclesiastes reached a stage of experience when he was strongly tempted to become a cynic. Matthew Arnold[1] regards this as the critical moment in his life. "Attempts at a philosophic indifference appear, at a sceptical suspension of judgment, at an easy *ne quid nimis*." Be not righteous overmuch, neither make thyself overwise. Why shouldst thou destroy thyself?

According to Renan, Ecclesiastes succumbed to this temptation. He sums him up as a worthy man devoid of prejudices, good at heart, but discouraged by the baseness of the time. He would willingly be a hero, but "verily God rewards heroism so little that one asks oneself if it is not going against His intention to take up things in that manner." "So the wise man is without zeal, without mysticism."[2] This is a French caricature of Ecclesiastes. The value of this man's experience is his triumph over the darker moods of our nature. We see him tempted before our eyes, and defeat is a foregone conclusion. Whilst we are watching him, he rises superior to all bitterness, shakes off depression, rejects a cynical conclusion, and displays the heroism of an unconquerable faith.

I

A cynic has been described as a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.[3]

[1] *Literature and Dogma*, chap. ii.
[2] Quoted by Wright, *Ecclesiastes*.
[3] By the author of *Lady Windermere's Fan*.

Ecclesiastes knows the market price of most men, but he never lost faith in a higher moral value. A man may see the weaknesses of society and portray them as ruthlessly as Thackeray did in *Vanity Fair*, but he will not become a cynic so long as he recognises the same human nature in himself. Ecclesiastes never absolved himself from common failings. No man can be a cynic who believes in one man besides himself, and Ecclesiastes believed at least in " the thousandth man." [1] Diogenes could not discover such a man, even with the aid of a lantern. A wounded egotism is a fruitful source of cynicism. When we are wrapped up in ourselves we take every disappointment in life as a personal rebuff. Ecclesiastes escaped this by taking a keen interest in his fellow-men. He has no personal grievance to nurse. His problems are not domestic, but social and moral.

II

" Be not righteous overmuch." The doctrine of the " golden mean " had been taught as a rule of virtue by Aristotle.[2] There was a current Greek maxim " Nothing in excess." Ecclesiastes was always opposed to a morbid asceticism which refused to enjoy the gifts of God. He might have been protesting here, against those narrow scruples which afterwards developed into Pharisaism. It was a warning against all extravagance and exaggeration in moral discipline. John Milton applied these words in this very way to the lawgivers of his time.

[1] vii. 28.

> " And certyn he is wel bigone
> Among a thousand that findeth oon.
> For ther may be no richesse
> Ageyns frendshippe of worthynesse."
>
> CHAUCER.

[2] *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II.

"Let not the frailty of man go on thus inventing needless troubles to itself, to groan under the false imagination of a strictness never imposed from above. . . . Be not righteous over-much is the counsel of Ecclesiastes—why shouldst thou destroy thyself? Let us not be thus over-anxious to strain at atoms and yet to stop every vent and cranny of permissive liberty, lest nature, wanting these needful pores and breathing-places, which God hath not debarred our weakness, either suddenly burst out into some wide rupture of open vice or frantic heresy or else fester with repressing and blasphemous thoughts, under an unreasonable and fruitless rigour of unwarranted law." [1]

It may still be necessary to apply these words in this way. There is a happy medium which avoids the falsehood of extremes. An enthusiast need not be a fanatic; a temperate man need not be an ascetic. There is such a thing as balance and proportion in religion. We may easily over-emphasise and so obscure some aspect of truth. There is a zeal of God which is "not according to knowledge." We may

> make God's love too narrow
> By false limits of our own,
> And magnify His strictness
> With a zeal He will not own.[2]

But if these words convey a warning, they have been much abused. It has become a rule of life which has checked many a fine impulse, many a noble enthusiasm, made men choose expediency rather than principle, safety rather than truth. It has produced a respectable

[1] *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, Milton's Prose Works, vol. iii.

[2] A luminous commentator of this passage was Robert Burns in his "Address to the Unco Guid," or the rigidly righteous.

mediocrity which never offends, never gives itself away, and is never likely to destroy itself sublimely—to lead a forlorn hope, a Balaclava charge. A contemporary of John Milton saw the danger lurking in this maxim. One of the low characters in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is Mr. Save-All. We hear him say: "We read of some that are righteous over-much; such men's rigidness prevails with them to judge and condemn all but themselves." In the character of Mr. Save-All Bunyan warns us against the perils of a merely prudential rule of life. It can produce a Church of Laodicea "neither cold nor hot." Dante pictures the hapless plight of "neutrals" in his darkest vision.[1] Spending their years "without infamy and without praise," they were "never really alive." Such was the spirit of the Renaissance. "Just what Dante scorns as unworthy, alike of Heaven and Hell, Botticelli accepts—that middle world in which men take no side in great conflicts, decide no great causes, and make great refusals."[2] It produced the diplomacy of a Talleyrand, whose life may be epitomised in his own phrase, *surtout, point de zèle.* Newman poured his scorn on the modern "safe man." "In the present day mistiness is the mother of wisdom. A man who can set down a half-dozen general propositions which escape from destroying one another only by being diluted into truisms, who can hold the balance between opposites so skilfully as to do without fulcrum or beam, who never enunciates a truth without guarding himself against being supposed to exclude the contradictory . . . this is your safe man . . . This is what the Church is said to want, not party men, but sensible, temperate, sober, well-judging persons, to guide it through the

[1] *Inferno*, Canto III. [2] Pater, *The Renaissance.*

channel of no-meaning, between the Scylla and Charybdis of Aye and No." [1] And this rule of life produced "Tomlinson," that colourless dweller in Berkeley Square. Not good enough for Heaven, not bad enough for Hell, Tomlinson, with no soul to call his own, is sent back to earth to acquire a more decided character, "for the race is run by one and one, and never by two and two." [2]

III

How far did Ecclesiastes fall under the spell of this temptation? Some put the worst construction on his words. He *was* a cynic. Others expend much ingenuity in the attempt to make his language orthodox. Others make allowance for his style. "The writer," says Plumptre,[3] "might have learnt the art of playful irony. He has uttered the precept 'Be not righteous overmuch.' He mentally sees, as it were, the complacent smile of those who were in no danger of such a fault, and who think that the precept gives them just the licence they want. So he meets that with another maxim. 'Yes, my friends,' he seems to say, 'but there is another "overmuch" against which you need a warning.' 'Be not overmuch wicked,' for its results are even more fatal than the other."

Despite every attempt to tone down his language, it is evident from what follows that Ecclesiastes is sorely tempted to take the cynical view of life. The temptation may have come to him as a way of escape from his perplexities. Was it worth while advocating a high standard of life? Prudence said, "Respect those laws

[1] *Apologia*, 1839–41, p. 103.
[2] Kipling, *Barrack-Room Ballads*.
[3] "Ecclesiastes," *Cambridge Bible*, p. 168.

of society which are equally against extremes of good and evil." This temptation comes to earnest men in all ages. Any one who sacrifices comfort and the legitimate rewards of life to a great idea is liable to be beset by the thought that far less expenditure would accomplish all that is required from him. Ecclesiastes seems to realise his peril—that he can easily make shipwreck of his life between these two maxims. He, too, is acquainted with the whirlpool of Scylla and Charybdis. There is only one way of safety. "He that feareth God shall come forth of them all."[1] He might have been lost amid those eddying currents, sucked down to depths of degradation, but he passed safely through the perilous waters. The lesson of childhood was again the anchor to his soul. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." But he has not yet triumphed. He has yet his fiercest battle to fight. He knows that wisdom is better than strength, that ten wise men are greater than ten mighty men. Had there not been a day when the presence of ten righteous men would have saved a city from destruction?[2] But no such men were found, and the city perished. Could they ever be found? "There is not a just man upon earth that doeth good and sinneth not." We live in a world of idle talk where listeners hear no good of themselves, and where no man is a hero to his own valet. "Take not heed unto all words that are spoken."[3] This resolution has found expression in the motto of a Scotch family: "They say: what say they? Let them say." Bitter memories assail him; withering the buds of

[1] vii. 18. "He that feareth God, he and he alone" comes forth of all things well, *i.e.* does his duty and leaves the result to God. (Plumptre). [2] Genesis xviii. 32. [3] vii. 21.

kindly feeling. He has done his best to read the secret of life, but it remains a riddle. He sought for wisdom, and life has been full of disenchantment. What is the cause of his intense depression? "One man among a thousand have I found; but a woman among all those have I not found." [1]

"There are two rocks in this world of ours (says F. W. Robertson) [2] on which the soul must either anchor or be wrecked. The one is God: the other is the sex opposite to itself. The one is the 'Rock of Ages' on which, if the human soul anchors, it lives the blessed life of faith. The other rock is of another character. Blessed is the man, blessed is the woman whose life has taught a confiding belief in the excellences of the sex opposite to their own—a blessedness second only to the blessedness of salvation. And the ruin in the other case is second only to the ruin of perdition."

Ecclesiastes had anchored his soul on the "Rock of Ages." His faith in human nature seems to have been wrecked on the other rock. He gives utterance to that proverbially low estimate of womanhood prevalent in the East, where woman is a slave and a toy. But Ecclesiastes is a Jew. Had he never read the idyll of Isaac and Rebecca, of the constancy of Ruth, of the virtuous woman in Proverbs, of the praise of the Shulamite in the Song of Solomon? Alas! poetry has become prose. He is showing us a hidden page in his experience which has distorted his judgment and darkened his life. What a lonely life his had been! How his soul must have starved for the ideal companionship! How easy it was to become bitter—to think of woman as Delilah and man as her prey!

[1] vii. 28. [2] Sermon on "Christian Casuistry."

IV

How did Ecclesiastes triumph over cynicism?

(*a*) "One man among a thousand have I found." We cannot overestimate the influence of the "thousandth man."

> One man in a thousand, Solomon says,
> Will stick more close than a brother.
> And it's worth while seeking him half your days
> If you find him before the other.
> Nine hundred and ninety-nine depend
> On what the world sees in you,
> But the Thousandth Man will stand your friend
> With the whole round world agin you.[1]

We do not as a rule believe in truth, purity, and goodness simply as abstract virtues. We believe in them because we see them. Theoretically, we get our standards of life from abstract principles which convince our reason that the world is governed on rational and righteous lines; but, practically, we get our standards from one another, and they rise or fall according to our experience. There is many a man who would not believe in goodness at all if he did not believe in you. And if you fail him, it will shake the very foundations of his faith in God and man. This disenchantment of faith is immortalised in one of the most pathetic of the Psalms,[2] and the same experience has been narrated with tender and consummate art by our own authoress.[3]

(*b*) There was a deeper reason for his triumph. It was the rediscovery of a truth more precious than a good man or woman—a truth which survives all disenchantment and gives the death-blow to cynicism.

[1] Kipling, *Rewards and Fairies.*

[2] Ps. lv.

[3] G. Eliot, *Silas Marner.*

'See, this only have I found, that God made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions." John Ruskin recognised this as the true note of prophecy: "You have had false prophets among you, who have told you that all men are nothing but fiends and wolves —half beast, half devil. Believe that, and indeed you may sink to that. But refuse that and have faith that God made you upright though you have sought out many inventions; so you will strive daily to become what your Maker meant and means you to be." [1]

Ecclesiastes recovered faith by going back to beginnings, to the teaching of his childhood, to the book of Genesis. This has restored his soul before.[2] He had recalled in another dark hour that the name and place of man was "Adam," a dependent creature with infinite possibilities. This truth comes home to him again. He looks at man and sees little trace of the Divine image. But the prodigal, though he has lost his character, has not lost his name. His name is Adam. He reels to and fro and staggers like a drunken man, but God made him upright. This upright man is not a finished creation. He is man in the making. He is Michelangelo's Adam, in the Sistine Chapel, without balance and completeness. "His whole form is gathered into an expression of expectancy and reception; he has hardly strength enough to lift his finger to touch the finger of the Creator, yet a touch of the finger-tips will suffice." [3] He is like Hawthorne's undeveloped youth, Donatello,[4] neither good nor bad in character, until the latent faculty of conscience awakes and he chooses good or evil.

[1] *Crown of Wild Olive*, Lecture III.
[2] vi. 10.
[3] Pater, *Renaissance*, p. 27.
[4] *Transformation.*

Ecclesiastes thinks of Adam as a free man. He has an inventive faculty which leads to great discoveries or leads him all astray. The most original and misleading of all his inventions is an attempt to thwart the purpose of God. Man is not as God meant him to be. Sin produces a caricature of the Divine image. If man is not rising he is falling, and those "finger-tips" which might touch God touch evil. So "nature" and "inventions" are at strife. Ecclesiastes has not lost faith in man, because he has not lost faith in God. He cannot, will not trace moral evil to the will of God. He resists fatalism with all his might, as though he knew instinctively that fatalism is the parent of cynicism. If

> 'Tis all a Chequer-board of Nights and Days
> Where Destiny with Men for Pieces plays,
> Hither and thither moves, and mates, and slays,
> And one by one back in the Closet lays,[1]

we may smile or sneer at the futility of all human effort. But if we believe that God made man upright and endowed him with a will of his own, we may see him "fall" in following a perverted inventiveness, but we can never despise a being so gifted, so redeemed by traces of a spiritual nature. It was in resisting the doctrine of fatalism that Ecclesiastes learnt how to conquer cynicism. Well he knows the low price human nature is all too ready to accept for herself.

> Ah, wasteful woman, she who may
> On her sweet self set her own price,
> Knowing man cannot choose but pay,
> How has she cheapen'd Paradise!

[1] Omar Khayyám.

How given for nought her priceless gift,
How spoil'd the bread and spill'd the wine,
Which, spent with due respective thrift,
Had made brutes men, and men divine.[1]

But he knew the hidden value of human nature priced so cheaply. He saw the ministering angel [2] in the doll —the one man in a thousand—the son in the prodigal. In awakening from childish dreams, he still clung desperately to the priceless things—faith, hope, love.

V

Matthew Arnold guessed the secret which saved Ecclesiastes from cynicism.[3] "The book has been said to breathe resignation at the grave of Israel. Attempts at a philosophic indifference appear, at a sceptical suspension of judgment. . . . Vain attempts, even at a moment which favoured them! shows of scepticism, vanishing as soon as uttered before the intractable conscientiousness of Israel! For the Preacher makes answer against himself: 'Though a sinner do evil a hundred times and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God.'" [4] This "intractable conscientiousness" was bred in the bone of the Jew, who knew in his heart that the righteous have an everlasting foundation.[5] The passing whirlwind could not touch the Rock of Ages.[6] The answer to Ecclesiastes, like the answer to Job's distress, came out of the storm. To that bewildered man, buffeted by a great strong wind, convulsed by an upheaval of emotion, scorched by the fire of affliction, the Lord was not in the

[1] Patmore, "The Angel in the House."
[2] ix. 9.
[3] *Literature and Dogma*, chap. ii.
[4] Ecclesiastes viii. 12.
[5] Proverbs x. 25.
[6] Isaiah xxvi. 4 (margin).

wind or the earthquake or the fire. But "after the fire, a still small voice." It was the voice which spoke to Moses, to Samuel, to Elijah and the prophets, which charmed the ear of Nazareth and stilled the storm on the Galilean lake, which we can still hear above all the storm of life.

XIII

PHILOSOPHY WITH CHEERFULNESS BREAKING IN

"You are a philosopher, Dr. Johnson," said his old schoolfellow Mr. Edwards. "I have tried too, in my time, to be a philosopher, but, I don't know how, cheerfulness was always breaking in."

BOSWELL'S *Johnson*, vol. ii. chap. xli. (Pitman).

Chapter VIII.—Who is as the wise man? and who knoweth the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom maketh his face to shine, and the hardness of his face is changed. I counsel thee, Keep the king's command, and that in regard of the oath of God. Be not hasty to go out of his presence; persist not in an evil thing: for he doeth whatsoever pleaseth him. Because the king's word hath power; and who may say unto him, What doest thou? Whoso keepeth the commandment shall know no evil thing; and a wise man's heart discerneth time and judgment. For to every purpose there is a time and judgment, because the misery of man is great upon him. For he knoweth not that which shall be, for who can tell him how it shall be? There is no man that hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit; neither hath he power over the day of death; and there is no discharge in (that) war: neither shall wickedness deliver him that is given to it. All this have I seen, and applied my heart unto every work that is done under the sun: there is a time wherein one man hath power over another to his hurt. And withal I saw the wicked buried, and they came to the grave; and they that had done right went away from the holy place, and were forgotten in the city.

This also is vanity. Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.

Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and prolong his days, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before him. But it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, (which are) as a shadow, because he feareth not before God. There is a vanity which is done upon the earth; that there be righteous men, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there be wicked men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous: I said that this also is vanity. Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun than to eat and to drink and to be merry: for that shall abide with him in his labour all the days of his life which God hath given him under the sun. When I applied mine heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done upon the earth: (for also there is that neither day nor night seeth sleep with his eyes:) then I beheld all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun: because however much a man labour to seek it out, yet shall he not find it; yea, moreover, though a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it.

Who is a wise man? Who knoweth the interpretation of a thing? The answer of Ecclesiastes is, "A man's wisdom maketh his face to shine, and the sternness of his face shall be changed." We see Ecclesiastes, for the first time, smile. He is a philosopher who is not disturbed by "cheerfulness breaking in." We know the ironic smile—

> The Spirit of the world,
> Beholding the absurdity of men—
> Their vaunts, their feats—let a sardonic smile,
> For one short moment, wander o'er his lips.
> That smile was Heine![1]

[1] Matthew Arnold, "Heine's Grave."

And we know the "unfathomable smile" of "La Gioconda" where Leonardo da Vinci expressed the concentrated cynicism of all the ages.[1] How different was the smile of Ecclesiastes! It was a moral triumph. He has learnt sympathy and patience, and it has softened a naturally hard expression. When some one repeated to Carlyle a favourite utterance of Margaret Fuller, "I accept the Universe," his sardonic comment is said to have been "Gad! she'd better!"[2] But there is all the difference between a stoic resignation to the inevitable and a cheerful acceptance of our place in a faulty world. We may be crushed into submission or we may acquiesce with all our faculties wide awake. We may accept our universe because "we'd better," or we may recognise that it is the wisest thing to do under the circumstances. It was in this wise way that Ecclesiastes accepted a difficult situation. Painfully conscious of life's anomalies and intellectually baffled, he never thought that "the absurdities of men" were observed by an ironical Providence.

> Through Thy vast creative plan
> Looking, from the worm to man,
> There is pity in Thine eyes,
> But no hatred nor surprise.[3]

The light that made his face to shine was the wisdom of faith in a just though hidden God. His faith was a far-away echo of the old paradox, "Verily, thou art a God that hidest Thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour!"[4]

[1] Pater, *The Renaissance*, "Leonardo da Vinci."
[2] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Lecture II.
[3] Whittier, "Andrew Rykman's Prayer."
[4] Isaiah xlv.

I

The times are out of joint, and Ecclesiastes does not think that he was born to set it right. But he clings to faith in a moral government of the world. It may be faith in an unknown power, but it is power that "makes for righteousness." Ecclesiastes is no friend to despotism, and some of his words may veil a protest against it, but his counsel is "submission to the powers that be." Accept the law of the land. Any government is better than anarchy. He knows he is treading on dangerous ground. With his country subject to a foreign yoke, he cannot speak out all his mind. His language is no doubt studiedly obscure, but his whisper is audible to those who are listening. Let those who understand interpret the "Delphic oracle" for themselves. "Whoso keepeth the commandment shall feel no evil thing, and a wise man's heart discerneth both time and judgment." [1] He has already given them the key to his deepest thoughts. Had he not said, "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under Heaven"? [2] Had he not said further, "God shall judge the righteous and the wicked"? [3] Let them put those two ideas together, "time and judgment," and wait patiently for the working of a Divine law. The hour may not come till the misery of man is great,[4] but it will arrive.

We see a picture of the infatuated blindness of the tyrant.[5] It illustrates the mediaeval proverb, "*Quem Deus vult perdere prius dementat.*" [6] The tyrant does not see, no one can tell him, the limits of his power or the overhanging judgment. No one, not even the man

[1] viii. 5. [2] iii. 1. [3] iii. 17.
[4] viii. 6. [5] viii. 8.
[6] "God first of all makes senseless him whom He wishes to destroy."

himself, can restrain his headlong career. However powerful he be he cannot ward off the inevitable end. The earthly tyrant will look into the face of a greater King—Death. In that war with the "King of terrors" there will be no discharge, no furlough, no rest till the bitter end, when the tyrant shall succumb to a conqueror mightier than he.[1] I have seen this very thing happen, says Ecclesiastes, though I have also seen something very different.[2] I have seen tyranny rule with impunity and honourably buried whilst good men have no epitaph. Retribution does not always follow closely on the heels of sin. And "because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil." But time and judgment are in the hands of God. The sentence against evil has been pronounced and will be executed. Again we see cheerfulness breaking in on his philosophy. "The mysterious slowness of the Divine method cannot shake my faith in a moral government of the world. I know that it shall be well with them that fear God."[3] When I speak of those that fear God, says he (with a keen scent for the language of formalism), I mean those who are really true to that conscience which no tyrant can invade, who fear God and have no other fear.[4] At the present moment I see nothing but disorder in the world. The righteous suffer as though they were wicked, and the wicked are honoured as though they were righteous.

Ecclesiastes seems to point to a special instance of this. In the burial of the wicked we have a parallel to the significant words in the parable of Dives and

[1] Verses 7 and 8. [2] viii. 10. [3] viii. 12.
[4] viii. 10. See Plumptre's interpretation.

Lazarus: "The rich man died and was buried." This, from the Jewish standpoint, was the fit close of a prosperous and honoured life. But notice the contrast to this. "They that had done right went away from the holy place, and were forgotten in the city." The "holy place" most likely refers to the temple. The writer has in mind those who had been cast out, compelled to leave the temple they had loved and worshipped in. And soon their place knows them no more. A new generation grows up and they are forgotten in the very city where they had once been honoured. Perhaps Koheleth himself had been so treated. If so, it would be a bitter reflection. I have spent sleepless hours in trying to unravel the mystery. I am just as ignorant as I was at the beginning.[1] "I beheld all the work of God that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun: because though a man labour to seek it out yet he shall not find it—though a wise man think to know it yet shall he not be able to find it." But in spite of everything I see and hear, I know that we are living in God's world. We have more reason to be glad than sad. We ought cheerfully to accept life as God's gift and enjoy whatever alleviation of sorrow He may send. "A man hath no better thing under the sun than to eat and to drink and to be merry: for that shall abide with him in his labour the days of his life which God giveth him."[2] With a dark social and political outlook, Ecclesiastes saw behind the scenes.

Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne,—
Yet that scaffold sways the future, and, behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above His own.[3]

[1] viii. 17. See Appendix on "The Ignorance of Man."
[2] viii. 15.
[3] J. R. Lowell, "The Present Crisis."

II

It was centuries after that the Apostle Paul sent the same message to the Christian Church at Rome. "Let every soul be subject to the higher powers. The powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God." [1] He wrote to those who lived under the shadow of Caesar's palace. The infamous Nero was on the throne. Caesar's despotism menaced individual freedom, and war, slavery, the degradation of womanhood blighted human life. Paul writes "Submit." Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. He sent the slave Onesimus back to his master. He told the workmen living under hard conditions "to study to be quiet, and do their own business." [2] Paul accepted the world as he found it, in a wise way. He had learnt the wisdom of patience, but all the faculties of faith and hope in something better were wide awake. He saw the Divine judgment against all tyranny and unrighteousness. The letter the slave took back to his master contained the charter of his emancipation.[3] The workman returned to his drudgery, not as "a thing, a hand, a tool," but as a child of God.

Paul is not free to utter all his thoughts. His language, like that of Ecclesiastes, is purposely veiled. But those to whom he writes have the key to his secret code, and it is a message of hope. "The mystery of iniquity doth already work. He who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way. Then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming." [4]

[1] Romans xiii. [2] 1 Thessalonians iv.
[3] Epistle to Philemon. [4] 2 Thessalonians ii.

This sentence against an evil work may not be executed speedily, but the day will come. Paul knows better than Ecclesiastes that life is a probation, that the great reason why the sentence is not carried out speedily lies in God's heart—that goodness of God which leads to repentance. Yet the ways of God are beyond him. "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out!" [1]

III

Who is as the wise man to-day? Who knoweth the interpretation of our social riddle? Ancient tyrannies like Persia have been abolished. The powers of Paul's day have vanished and left no trace of their terror. But we have our social problem baffling to wisdom and overshadowing our life. The tyrant Ecclesiastes and Paul saw on the throne was the incarnation of that Selfishness which in many forms rears its head amongst us to-day. All such evil work is already sentenced. If vile things are done and no bolt comes from the sky, it does not mean impunity. The wages of sin is death, though pay day may be deferred. It is in God's time and will be paid to the uttermost farthing.

God's ways seem dark, but, soon or late,
They touch the shining hills of day;
The evil cannot brook delay,
The good can well afford to wait.
. . . . . .
Ye have the future, grand and great,
The safe appeal of Truth to Time! [2]

The wise man to-day counsels patience whilst he is

[1] Romans xi. 33. [2] Whittier, "Lines inscribed to Friends."

deeply concerned about a pressing social problem. Do we understand our problem as well as Ecclesiastes and Paul understood their own? Do we share the burdens of our fellow-men as they did? Have we Paul's wisdom who could both acknowledge a slave-owner's rights and teach him his duty to his slave?

Listen to a wise man. "The central fact of our modern life is work. Work, with its elaborate and gigantic organisation, is perfectly indifferent to the welfare of the worker who is valued merely as a means to an end. The worker's soul requires time for quiet growth, whereas Work turns life into a breathless rush and hurry and knows neither rest nor peace. We can stifle thought in work, but we cannot indefinitely work on for work's sake only. Thus, in the conflict between work and soul, life is torn asunder." [1]

Is this the tyranny which exists to-day? Then a shadow as real as that which depressed Ecclesiastes rests upon us, and we are at the mercy of a tyrant as ruthless as Nero. If Work produces soulless workers the sentence of God has been pronounced against it, and He calls us to carry out that sentence, to restore to the worker his soul and give him joy in his work. It is a Godlike task to end the conflict between work and soul—to bring them together again, so that what God hath joined together no man may dare to put asunder.

IV

We need a philosophy "with cheerfulness breaking in." The philosophy of resignation to circumstances has no joy. There are three tests of wise work, said

[1] Eucken, *The Meaning and Value of Life*, p. 23.

Ruskin,—it must be honest, useful, cheerful.[1] Was it done with enjoyment? he once asked about a piece of carving; was the carver happy about it? The happiness of the workman is as vital as his work. William Morris strove to recover a lost cheerfulness in work. He hated joyless work as worse than poverty. He saw the workman in the Middle Ages happy at his work and told us the reason. The workman was something more than a tool; he had a soul in his work. "No work which cannot be done with pleasure in the doing is worth doing." [2]

John Ruskin dreamt dreams and William Morris strove to realise them. Ruskin submitted to "the powers that be" whilst teaching principles of duty which laid the axe at the root of selfishness. William Morris sought to wield the axe vigorously, to hew down every tree which did not bring forth good fruit. In the "Dream of John Ball" we see what he strove to realise. It is a dream of cheerfulness breaking in on a world doing joyless work or resigned to a sad philosophy. It is a dream of happy human fellowship "where our business is to make this earth a beautiful and happy place." The wisdom of William Morris made his face to shine with the glow of an inspired purpose, and the complacency of the Victorian era was changed in him to a sympathetic interest in his fellow-men. Instead of man "getting through the day like plants thrust into the earth which cannot turn this way or that, but as the wind blows them," he saw an erect creature, with will alert and hand active to turn to beautiful shape the creature of his thought. "Art is man's expression of his

[1] *Crown of Wild Olive.*
[2] See Mackail's *Life of William Morris*, ii. 68.

joy in labour." [1] All joyless labour is produced by tyrannies which will seem as absurd to future ages as any oriental despotism. But there is a darker shadow than that of human tyranny resting on dreamer and worker. It is the shadow of ignorance, of the fear of Death, the shadow of despair that strength is spent in vain, that we are labourers for nought. How short or long is the working day? Does it end in night without a dawn? How can work and hope work together? These anxious questions account for the deeper shadows in Ecclesiastes, and modern pessimism and that sense of the mystery of life which haunted the waking and sleeping hours of William Morris.

[1] See *William Morris*, chap. xi., by A. Clutton-Brock (Home University Library).

XIV

THE DAY'S WORK

O to be up and doing, O
Unfearing and unshamed to go
In all the uproar and the press
About my human business! . . .
For still the Lord is Lord of might,
In deeds, in deeds, He takes delight;
The plough, the spear, the laden barks,
The field, the founded city, marks . . .
Those He approves that ply the trade,
That rock the child, that wed the maid,
That with weak virtues, weaker hands
Sow gladness in the peopled lands,
And still, with laughter, song and shout
Spin the great wheel of earth about.

R. L. Stevenson, "Our Lady of the Snows."

Chapter IX. *verses* 1-10.—For all this I laid to my heart, even to explore all this; that the righteous and the wise and their works are in the hand of God: whether it be love or hatred, man knoweth it not; all is before them.

All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth and to him that sacrificeth not; as is the good, so is the sinner; and he that sweareth as he that feareth an oath.

This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one event unto all: yea also, the heart of the sons of men is full

of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that (they go) to the dead.

For to him that is joined with all the living there is hope: for a living dog is better than a dead lion.

For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten.

As well their love, as their hatred and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun.

Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God hath already accepted thy works. Let thy garments be always white; and let not thy head lack ointment.

Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity; for that is thy portion in life, and in thy labour wherein thou labourest under the sun.

Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work nor device nor knowledge nor wisdom in the grave whither thou goest.

The gloom of Ecclesiastes may be partly accounted for by the absence of an assured hope of a future life. The working day was short. "Man goeth forth to his labour and to his work until the evening," but the evening did not bring rest. Shadows deeper than night gathered around him. The day's work was left unfinished. It was hopeless work.

> Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve,
> And hope without an object cannot live.[1]

I

Although Ecclesiastes has gleams of inspiration which throw some light on the future, in his present mood he can see little to redeem a cheerless prospect. The great

[1] Coleridge, "Work without Hope."

leveller Death seems to cut short all enterprises and sweep away all distinctions. "There is one event to the righteous and the wicked." Differences in character all end in a common destiny. Life's fitful fever may be aggravated by self-forgetfulness or self-seeking, but it ends in the same long sleep. All man's life, in its lofty and vain desires, in its earnest striving and wild dreams, seems mocked by the same ultimate oblivion. Whilst there is life there is hope. Hope was found at the bottom of Pandora's treasure-chest of evils, and Ecclesiastes finds the same jewel at the bottom of his philosophy. The hope of life, though it does not stretch beyond the horizon of the grave, survives to the end: for a living dog is better than a dead lion.[1] Ecclesiastes does not perceive any inconsistency in this conclusion. In another mood he had said that death was better than life. When he considered oppressions and the tears of the oppressed, he had praised the dead more than the living.[2] Now he clings to life. Life, with all its varieties of vanity, is better than the uniformity of death. Perhaps something of the nobility of human consciousness flashes upon him. "The living know that they shall die." There is greatness in the very sense of the approaching doom. There is a dignity even in the cry with which those who enter on the arena, as destined for death, greet the sovereign Power that dooms them. "*Ave, Caesar; morituri te salutamus!*"[3] "Man is but a reed, the most feeble thing in nature; but he is a thinking reed. A drop of water suffices to kill him, but if the Universe were to crush him, man

[1] ix. 4. [2] Chap. iv.

[3] "Hail, Caesar; we who are about to die, greet thee!" (Salute of the Gladiators).

would still be more noble than that which killed him, because he knows that he dies . . . the Universe knows nothing of this." [1] Yet this thought gives Ecclesiastes little consolation. In death there are no compensations, no wages. Even the immortality of living in the memory of others is denied to the majority of mankind. There are no passions, no rivalries, no distinctions, there—the deadliest foes, rival statesmen, master and servant, rest side by side together.[2]

II

Ecclesiastes makes another surprising recovery of spirit. He falls back again on that cheerful philosophy which has served him so well before. "Accept life as God's gift. Take it as your portion and make the best not the worst of it." He has reached this conclusion, that whilst there is no satisfaction in self-indulgence, and a good woman is difficult to find, there is a form of happiness to be found in labour and a quiet domestic life, which those who go further afield may easily miss.[3] If it does not remove the sense of the vanity of life, at least it makes it endurable. A modern writer regards this as the epitome of wisdom.[4] "If we wish to be happy and have to live with average men and women, as most of us have to live, we must learn to take an interest in the topics which concern average men and women. We ought not to sacrifice a single moment's pleasure in our attempt to do something too big for us. . . . Many a man goes into his study, shuts himself up with his poetry or his psychology, comes out half understanding what he has read, is miserable because

[1] Pascal's *Thoughts*, vi. [2] ix. 6. [3] ix. 7-10.
[4] Mark Rutherford's *Autobiography*, Preface to second edition.

he cannot find anybody with whom he can talk about it, and misses altogether the far more genuine joy which he could have obtained from a game with his children or listening to what his wife had to tell him about her neighbours. . . . One-fourth of life is intelligible, the other three-fourths is unintelligible darkness, and our earliest duty is to cultivate the habit of not looking round the corner." "Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy. . . . God hath already accepted thy works. Let thy garments be always white, and let not thine head lack ointment. Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest, all the days of the life of thy vanity. . . ." [1]

We see here one of the brightest pictures of domestic life in the Bible. We see the family gathered round the table in white garments, in contrast to the black robes of mourning; and the perfume of the broken alabaster box of ointment, the symbol of love and joy, pervades the house. Yet there is a skeleton in the cupboard. This happy scene is only the conquest of the spirit over dark, haunting thoughts. In spite of music and merriment a shadow rests upon everything. The father sets out in the morning to do with his might what his hand finds to do, but he knows that his working day is short, "for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the grave whither thou goest." [2]

III

The Gospel of work as the panacea for all ills has been preached with no uncertain sound. Have we not heard a clarion voice in our day: "Produce, produce! Were it but the pitifulest infinitesimal fraction of a product, produce it in God's name! . . . Up, up! whatsoever

[1] ix. 7-9. [2] ix. 10.

thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might. Work while it is called to-day, for the night cometh wherein no man can work." [1] But whilst we face life bravely, and find a great blessing in work, we cannot help wondering why we are doing it. The worker knows that he is greater than his work. I may be doing manual or brain work, but unless my heart is in it, the work will not be properly done. Work without hope may be done in a fashion, but it is mere drudgery. It deadens the soul of the worker. Work which is not done with a man's heart cannot be done with his might. Work in itself without sufficient scope gives no meaning or value to life. The old question of Ecclesiastes, "What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?" seems bound up with another question, "How long is the working day?"

"Nowhere," says an acute thinker, "is modern life summed up more forcibly and characteristically than in its favourite contention that it is possible to find a meaning and value for life without having recourse to another world. Yet a paralysing doubt saps the vitality of our age. . . . With all our astounding achievements and unremitting progress we are not really happy." [2] We see both this contention and doubt in one of the best modern workers, William Morris. Few have done more with their might what their hand found to do. He sought to remake society. With the soul of an artist, he was willing to be a mechanic and a tradesman for the sake of reconstituting the foundations and fabric of life. Yet he worked as one who knew that there is no work nor device nor knowledge nor wisdom in "Sheol."

[1] *Sartor Resartus*, Bk. II. chap. ix.
[2] Eucken, *Meaning and Value of Life*, p. 24.

"Sometimes we must needs think that we shall live again," he once said, but this intruding thought had no influence on the day's work.[1] He thought he had found in the Northern Sagas the story of a people who worked happily without thought of profit or loss. He saw that all the enormous increase of productive power in the Victorian era had failed to increase general happiness, and no one ever worked harder to diminish the amount of unhappy labour. But the shadows of a looming night depressed his soul. In his earlier years there was nothing to trouble his life of happy activity except the thought that it must some day come to an end. The thought of Death sure to come and cut short human enterprise made life seem unintelligible.[2] The contention that it is possible to find meaning and value for life in work without God, without another world, is challenged by all the higher faculties of our nature.

There seems to have come a moment in the life of Carlyle when work had become hopeless grind, and we know the cause. "I once said to him," says Froude, "that I could only believe in a God who did something. With a cry of pain, which I shall never forget, he said, 'He does nothing!'"[3] Without God or hope of life on a larger scale than we see it, even the man with a high ideal loses nerve for the day's work. Night comes as a merciful friend. We cannot work without hope. We cannot do with our might what our hand finds to do unless our heart is in it.

[1] Clutton-Brock, *William Morris*, p. 119 (Home University Library). [2] *Ibid.* p. 214.

[3] Carlyle's *Life in London* (Silver Library), vol. ii. p. 280. When Carlyle made this despairing remark God was working in history—inspiring Lincoln to liberate the slaves in America and Mazzini and Garibaldi to create a united Italy.

IV

When our countrymen worked by the dim light cast on life by the Northern Sagas, missionaries came to the court of King Edwin and asked for a hearing.[1] At length, one of the king's chief men said, "The present life of man, O king, seems to me in comparison of that time which is unknown to us, like to the swift flight of a sparrow through the room wherein you sit at supper in winter . . . the sparrow, I say, flying in at one door and immediately out at another, whilst he is within is safe from the wintry storm; but after a short space, he immediately vanishes out of your sight into the dark winter from which he had emerged. So this life of man appears for a short space, but of what went before or what is to follow, we are utterly ignorant. If therefore this new doctrine contains something more certain, it seems justly to deserve to be followed."[2] The dim light of the Northern Sagas paled in the light of Christianity. Our fathers heard a message which lengthened the working day, whilst it brought life and the hope of immortality to every worker.

V

"I must work the works of Him that sent Me while it is day. The night cometh when no man can work."[3] Such is the New Testament rendering of the thought of Ecclesiastes. Carlyle quoted the words of the philosopher and the words of Christ as though they expressed the same meaning. There is a parallel with a profound difference. The working day is just as strenuous, but

[1] A.D. 627.
[2] Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, Bk. II. chap. xiii.
[3] St. John ix. 4.

the evening brings rest, and the night ends in a glorious dawn. Jesus Christ confirms the wisdom of Ecclesiastes. "Are there not twelve hours in the day?" [1] no more, no less. There is a day's work to be done which the night will cut short. We are not to live in memories or in the dreamy future, but in the present. The Divine workman is touched with all our feeling of opportunity crowded into a brief time, and that imperative "must" expresses the "might" with which work ought to be done. Jesus Christ answered for ever the philosopher's cry of pain, "He does nothing!" "My Father has been working even until now, and I am working." [2] Yet how short His working day seemed to be! The light failed, so that He could not work, and His work and device and knowledge and wisdom seemed to end in the grave.

. . . . . .

"The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness and let us put on the armour of light." [3]

In such fashion the Christian workman spoke of his working day. What Jesus Christ called "day" Paul calls "night," and the "coming night" he calls "day." How can we explain this change in the Christian vocabulary? The answer can only be found in the Easter fact and message. Life and immortality have come to light. The prospect of a glorious dawn in a better world than this has put everything else in the shade. Compared with that "coming day" our day is night. Compared with the light in which we shall see the full value of Divine and human labour, Paul would say that we are all working by candle light! How these Christian

[1] St. John xi. 9. [2] St. John v. 17. [3] Romans xiii. 12.

workmen worked with their might! Was there ever better work done, if productiveness includes motive and character, if you inspect not only the work but ask whether the worker was happy! Look at them casting off the works of darkness, putting on the armour of light, pulling down strongholds of evil, building the walls of the holy city, whilst they watched for the streak of dawn which heralded the coming of a brighter day!

Our working day is short, so we must work while it is day. The night cometh when no man can work, and that night will dawn on prospects largely determined by the way we have spent our working day. The experiments of to-day will lead to the discoveries of to-morrow. The hard apprenticeship qualifies for finished work. The poor daub of a picture which is our best to-day is a prophecy of that masterpiece when

> Only the Master shall praise us, and only the Master shall blame;
> And no one shall work for money, and no one shall work for fame,
> But each for the joy of working, and each, in his separate star,
> Shall draw the thing as he sees it for the God of things as they are.[1]

There is the unspeakable wonder and privilege of co-operation with God. "Work out your own salvation . . . for it is God that worketh in you to will and to do of His good pleasure."[2] This is the basis for faith in the magnificent harmony God can produce out of the most discordant life, making all things work together for good.

[1] Kipling. [2] Epistle to Philippians ii. 12.

XV

WISDOM BETTER THAN STRENGTH

O brother man! fold to thy heart thy brother;
Where pity dwells, the peace of God is there;
To worship rightly is to love each other,
Each smile a hymn, each kindly deed a prayer.

Then shall all shackles fall; the stormy clangour
Of wild war music o'er the earth shall cease;
Love shall tread out the baleful fire of anger,
And in its ashes plant the tree of peace!

WHITTIER, "Worship."

Chapter IX. *verses* 11-18.—I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

For man also knoweth not his time: as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare, even so are the sons of men snared in an evil time when it falleth suddenly upon them.

I have also seen wisdom under the sun on this wise, and it seemed great unto me.

There was a little city and few men within it; and there came a great king against it, and besieged it, and built great bulwarks against it.

Now, there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city: yet no man remembered that same poor man.

Then said I, Wisdom is better than strength: nevertheless the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard.

The words of the wise spoken in quiet are heard more than the cry of him that ruleth among fools.

Wisdom is better than weapons of war; but one sinner destroyeth much good.

Ecclesiastes goes on to say that whilst it is man's highest wisdom to do the duty that lies nearest, he must not be surprised at any disproportion between expenditure and results. The plausible teaching that self-help and virtue are always materially rewarded is not borne out by the widest experience. When George Borrow wrote of his father's abilities and misfortunes,[1] "with far inferior qualifications many a man has become a field-marshal or general . . . but the race is not always to the swift nor the battle to the strong," he was only giving an instance of the truth that a man may fail though he fulfil the conditions of success. Ecclesiastes warns us against reckoning on immediate results, and perhaps is passing judgment on the man feverish to gain the goal of his ambition.

> Oh, if we draw a circle premature,
> Heedless of far gain,
> Greedy for quick returns of profit, sure
> Bad is our bargain![2]

He reverts to the old theme of time and chance: man knoweth not his time. He feels the weakness and uncertainty of life like the prophet who uses the same memorable image: "Thou makest man as the fish of the sea . . . they take up all of them with the angle, they catch them in their net and gather them in their

[1] Borrow, *Lavengro*, chap. i.
[2] Browning, "A Grammarian's Funeral."

drag, . . . therefore they sacrifice unto their net and burn incense unto their drag." [1] The fine network of circumstances in which we all seem to be entangled defeats our calculation and depresses the spirit. Habakkuk, the prophet, rises above this plaintive note to a lyrical burst of faith in God. Ecclesiastes cannot do that. He is no prophet, and lacks spiritual vision, yet he has a comforting message. If the race is not always to the swift nor the battle to the strong, yet life is full of secret compensation for all effort. If bread does not always come to the wise, wisdom is still its own exceeding great reward. If riches are not always the reward of character, character is still the best of all productions. For virtue unrewarded and strength which fails, there is a calm enduring wisdom "more precious than rubies" and better than strength.

I

"Wisdom is better than strength . . . better than weapons of war." Did Ecclesiastes expect any one to believe it? It has never been a popular doctrine. He lived in a warlike age, when might was "right" and war settled all disputes. One man lived above his age; one man said it was all wrong, and told the story of the poor wise man to any who cared to listen. No one knows the name of the city or the wise man, but it is so like the story of the wise woman who saved a city, that it is worth retelling.[2]

A certain man named Sheba had rebelled against

[1] Habakkuk i.

[2] See 2 Sam. xx. 14. But Cheyne thinks that the "poor wise man" may be Koheleth, who tells this "striking little story" (*Job and Solomon*, chap. iv.).

King David and fled to the city of Abel. It was a little city, with few men in it, but it sheltered the man who was a menace to the State. David had only just recovered his throne, and rebellion had to be nipped in the bud. So Joab, his general, besieged the city and built great bulwarks against it. Now there was found in it a poor wise woman. Gaining an interview with Joab she made this appeal to him: "We are not a strong city, but we have some reputation for wisdom. Why destroy a city and a mother in Israel? Why punish a city because there is one sinner in it?" The appeal went home, and the cause of the trouble was removed. The woman, by her wisdom, delivered the city from the horrors of war. No one remembered that same wise woman. Her wisdom was not accepted as a principle. But, long afterwards, Ecclesiastes paid this tribute to her memory by recalling, if not her own act, the same wisdom which had prevailed over force.

II

Ecclesiastes makes a striking use of history. If history is "philosophy teaching by example" what do we gain by learning unless we become philosophers? We repeat the same mistakes over and over again, because we fail to learn the lessons of the past. The lesson of history is surely this, that there are two ways of doing everything; a wise and a foolish way. Yet you still hear it said that international disputes can only be solved in one way—by weapons of war. Ecclesiastes is a wise reader of history. With a tendency to look on the dark side of experience, he stubbornly believes in the supremacy of principle. "The words of wise men are heard in quiet more than the cry of him

that ruleth among fools." This wisdom will gain a hearing in times of reflection more than the windy declamation of popular oratory. If the wise man were heard in quiet to-day, he would remind us of one lesson history has dinned into our ears. No one man—one sinner—should be allowed to decide a national policy and run the risk of destroying much good.[1] One covetous Achan in the Israelite camp demoralises an army. One Sheba, pursuing a selfish policy, may involve the destruction of a city. One Attila may animate a destroying host. One Napoleon I. may incarnate militarism and perpetuate an evil tradition. One Napoleon III., by political adventure, can precipitate the conflict of nations. One King Leopold, a trafficker in human flesh for gain, can trample on the conscience of Christendom. One insolent assertion of Caesarism can destroy international confidence and aggravate the feelings of the civilised world. The wisdom of Ecclesiastes would safeguard the common interests of nations. He would bring the collective wisdom of all ages to bear against any individual judgment. By teaching the plain lessons of history and sound principles of life, he would create a solid resistance to all hasty warlike counsels.

III

Ecclesiastes is our teacher to-day in reminding us of the little city and the poor wise man. Robert Browning prophesied that the new age would renounce the worship of size and realise the greatness of little things.[2]

> Somebody turns our spy-glass round, or else
> Puts a new lens in it: grass, worm, fly grow big:

[1] ix. 18. [2] "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium.'"

> We find great things are made of little things,
> And little things go lessening till at last
> Comes God behind them. Talk of mountains now ?
> We talk of mould that heaps the mountain, mites
> That throng the mould, and God that makes the mites.

If we use our spy-glass properly we shall think more of wisdom than strength, more of words of the wise than weapons of war, more of principles than bulwarks. If the lessons of history are not lost upon us we shall hear God speaking to us more in quiet counsel than in " wild tongues that have not God in awe." The wisdom that seemed great to Ecclesiastes has yet to be approved by a world still forgetful of the " poor wise man." We shall remember the poor wise man when we believe in the force of ideas more than in physical force. " Dynamite," said the late head of the Russian Holy Synod, " is almost innocuous compared with the force of a new idea;" but we are slow to believe that the idea of wisdom being better than weapons of war can ever compete with an explosive. This idea of wisdom, according to Ecclesiastes, is frankly repudiated. " We despise a nation, just as we despise a man, who submits to insult (says ex-President Roosevelt).[1] By war alone can we acquire those virile qualities necessary to win in the stern strife of actual life. The warlike nations inherit the earth."

Do the warlike nations inherit the earth ? Mr. Roosevelt said in 1910 : " Rome went down primarily because the Roman citizen would not fight." Is that a wiser remark than Seeley's : " The Roman Empire perished for want of men, not because they would not fight, but men who could not be found because they had not survived interminable wars " ?

[1] *The Strenuous Life.*

Do the warlike nations inherit the earth? The least warlike nations in the West are Canada and the United States, and the most warlike have been some of the South American States, like Nicaragua and Venezuela. During the first twenty years of Venezuela's independent existence she fought no less than one hundred and twenty battles. Every election was a battle. They followed

> the good old rule,
> . . . . the simple plan,
> That they should take, who have the power,
> And they should keep who can.[1]

Some of the South American States to-day confirm the conclusion of Ecclesiastes that "wisdom is better than weapons of war." States, which no one would trust a generation ago, have become as secure as any great European capital. Countries like Brazil and the Argentine have been drawn into the circle of international trade and exchange. It is no longer profitable to repudiate obligations and scramble for spoils. Has the public credit in these states improved because the army has increased? The armies are much smaller than they were a generation ago, whilst the basis of confidence is more established.

IV

The poor wise man or woman still saves cities by the method of appeal and arbitration. History has been teaching us again during the last hundred years that wisdom is better than strength and weapons of war. This wisdom have I seen also under the sun, and it was great unto me. One morning in the summer of 1862 a small sloop dropped slowly down the Mersey with the

[1] Wordsworth, "Rob Roy's Grave."

look of a vessel taking a holiday trial trip. She sailed to the Azores, where her real name and character were revealed. The British flag was hauled down, the Confederate flag run up, and the Captain of the *Alabama* opened sealed orders directing him to destroy everything that flew the ensign of the newly called United States of America. The escape of the *Alabama* from Liverpool opened a diplomatic campaign between England and the United States, which embittered the relationship, and lasted as long as the siege of Troy. But the words of the wise were heard in quiet more than the cry of him that ruleth among fools. After protracted heated disputes the method of arbitration was finally agreed upon by both nations, and in September 1872 the arbitrators at Geneva gave their decision. They were unanimous in finding Great Britain liable for the acts of the *Alabama*, and awarded the United States financial compensation.[1] The words of a wise man, whose self-command largely contributed to this issue, can never be forgotten: "Although I may think the sentence was hard . . . I regard the fine imposed on this country as dust in the balance compared with the moral value of the example set when these two great nations—among the most fiery and jealous in the world with regard to anything that touches national honour—went in peace and concord before a judicial tribunal rather than resort to the arbitrament of the sword." [2]

v

The words of wise men are heard in those quiet moments when the "tumult and the shouting dies."

[1] Morley's *Life of Gladstone*, vol. ii. Bk. VI. chap. ix.
[2] Gladstone, House of Commons, June 15, 1880.

Ancient and modern wisdom agree. It was proposed at Athens to adopt the gladiatorial shows in imitation of Rome, but an Athenian, Demonas, cried out in the Assembly, "Before you do that, throw down the altar erected to Mercy." And thirty years ago John Bright echoed the Athenian's cry, "Whilst we adhere to heathen practices, let us no longer claim to be Christians. Take down your ten commandments from inside your Churches and say no longer that you read or regard the Sermon on the Mount."

There is a story of Buddha meeting a monstrous form of terror and transforming it into a dove, which is not merely poetical. The spirit of Gautama Buddha was the spirit of mercy. The Beatitudes of Buddhism reveal a noble, universal charity. The destruction of life in any form is alien to the kindly fellow-feeling which breathes through all the words and deeds of the gentle Buddha, thrilled with the pain of sympathy for mankind.

Once, on the errands of his mercy bent,
Buddha, the holy and benevolent,
Met a fell monster, huge and fierce of look,
Whose awful voice the hills and forests shook.
"O son of peace!" the giant cried, "thy fate
Is sealed at last, and love shall yield to hate."
The unarmed Buddha looking, with no trace
Of fear or anger, in the monster's face,
In pity said: "Poor fiend, even thee I love."
Lo! as he spake, the sky-tall terror sank
To hand-breadth size; the huge abhorrence shrank
Into the form and fashion of a dove;
And where the thunder of its rage was heard,
Circling above him sweetly sang the bird:
"Hate hath no harm for love," so ran the song;
"And Peace unweaponed conquers every wrong!" [1]

[1] Whittier, "Disarmament."

That is the light of Asia which pales in the Light of the World! "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God." There are people of a sweet angelic nature whom you cannot quarrel with, who diffuse concord as an atmosphere, wherever they go. Verily, they have their reward. There are others who love peace so much that they will pay any price for it. And there are meddlesome peacemakers totally devoid of tact, who generally make matters worse instead of better. The true peacemaker learns his task in the school of Christ. The strife of the world is born out of man striving with his Maker, and to believe that God was in Jesus Christ reconciling the world to Himself, is the way to gain heart for all effort, to reconcile men with one another. Christ's peacemaker begins his ministry at home. Our task is nothing less than to tame the "untamable thing," the tongue. It is a fountain which sends forth waters both sweetly refreshing and bitter as gall! The Peacemaker learns how to extract from the fountain the fresh water without a trace of salt in it, to overcome the wisdom which is earthly by the wisdom which is from above, which is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. There can be no peace without righteousness. A statesman once thrilled the heart of England, after a time of suspense, by bringing a message of three words: "Peace with honour." But the alliance between peace and honour has not always been a happy one. Peace with its unvarying principles, and honour with its flexible code have not always agreed. The ideal union is Peace with Righteousness. The most glorious of all bridal days shall dawn when Mercy and Truth

meet together and Righteousness and Peace kiss each other!

The tumult and the shouting dies;
The captains and the kings depart:
Still stands Thine ancient sacrifice,
An humble and a contrite heart.
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget—lest we forget!

For heathen heart that puts her trust
In reeking tube and iron shard,
All valiant dust that builds on dust,
And guarding, calls not Thee to guard,
For frantic boast and foolish word—
Thy mercy on Thy people, Lord![1]

[1] Kipling, "The Recessional."

XVI

EXAMPLES OF WISDOM AND FOLLY

Expediency is man's wisdom: doing right is God's.
MEREDITH, "The Ordeal of Richard Feverel."

In tragic life, God wot,
No villain need be. Passions spin the plot:
We are betrayed by what is false within.
MEREDITH, "Modern Love."

Chapter X.—Dead flies cause the ointment of the perfumer to send forth a stinking savour: so doth a little folly outweigh wisdom and honour. A wise man's heart is at his right hand, but a fool's heart at his left. Yea, also, when the fool walketh by the way, his understanding faileth him, and he saith to every one that he is a fool.

If the spirit of the ruler rise up against thee, leave not thy place; for yielding allayeth great offences. There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, as it were an error which proceedeth from the ruler: folly is set in great dignity, and the rich sit in low place. I have seen servants upon horses, and princes walking as servants upon the earth.

He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it; and whoso breaketh through a fence, a serpent shall bite him. Whoso heweth out stones shall be hurt therewith; and he that cleaveth wood is endangered thereby.

If the iron be blunt, and one do not whet the edge, then must he put to more strength: but wisdom is profitable to direct. If the serpent bite before it be charmed, then is there no advantage

in the charmer. The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious, but the lips of a fool will swallow up himself. The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness, and the end of his talk is mischievous madness. A fool also multiplieth words: yet man knoweth not what shall be; and that which shall be after him, who can tell him?

The labour of fools wearieth every one of them, for he knoweth not how to go to the city. Woe to thee, O land, when thy king is a child, and thy princes eat in the morning! Happy art thou, O land, when thy king is the son of nobles, and thy princes eat in due season, for strength, and not for drunkenness! By slothfulness the roof sinketh in, and through idleness of the hands the house leaketh. A feast is made for laughter, and wine maketh glad the life; and money answereth all things. Curse not the king, no, not in thy thought; and curse not the rich in thy bedchamber: for a bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter.

THERE is a lull in the storm, and we find Ecclesiastes in a more normal state of mind than we have yet seen him. He gives us the benefit of his counsel in a series of proverbial sayings which have no logical connection, but which seem to prove that in spite of the "vanity" of life, he has learnt to prize the rich treasury of experience. He has had a wide experience of life, high and low. He knows the life of the court though he has been more an observer than an actor. It is not the experience of a courtier, still less of a king, but of one who watched daily affairs and scenes of political life with shrewd insight into the depths of motive and passion. He gives us the result of his reflections in some examples of wisdom and folly. "A wise man's heart is at his right hand: but a fool's heart is at his left" (ver. 2). This special symbolism is not found elsewhere in the Old Testament, but the figurative significance of right and left was widely understood. "The augur among the

Romans, having taken his stand on the Capitoline hill and marked out with his wand the space in the heavens to be the field of observation, divided the space into two from top to bottom. If the birds appeared on the left side of the division the augury was unlucky, if on the right side the augury was pronounced to be favourable." [1] Our own use of the word " sinister " is a survival of this idea. The highest application of the symbolism is found in those that are set on the right hand and on the left in the parable.[2]

" There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, which proceedeth from the ruler. . . . I have seen servants upon horses, and princes walking as servants upon the earth " (ver. 7). The social background of this book is a badly governed state. A weak ruler, though a tyrant, cannot avert social anarchy. This is a picture from life. The tyrant, acting on a sudden freak, exalts some favourite to honour, and the next moment degrades a nobleman. This displacement destroys all stability, and leads to every type of abuse. It makes preferment depend not on ability but on some unforeseen stroke of fortune which may suddenly unseat a prince from his horse, and enable his groom to leap into the saddle with plenty of assurance but without the competence of his master. In a disorganised state like Turkey, where fear and suspicion are in the air, where civility and flattery are cultivated to gain a monarch's favour, it is quite a common sight to see servants riding upon horses and princes walking as servants.

" He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it, and whoso breaketh a hedge a serpent shall bite him " (ver. 8).

[1] Brewer, *Phrase and Fable* on " Left."
[2] St. Matthew xxv.

This and the following sayings have, probably, a double-edged application. The literature of all nations is full of platitudes which repeat the warning familiar to us in the fate of the engineer "hoist with his own petard." Be sure your sin will find you out. But we ought to credit Ecclesiastes, perhaps, with a meaning which lies more below the surface. Count the cost before you become a reformer. If you attempt to remove the tottering wall of a decayed and corrupt institution, beware of the serpents in the crannies! Those who have "vested interests" in the abuse will bite the hand that disturbs them.[1] If you must be a reformer, do your work with your eyes wide open and wisely. If you must attempt to lay your axe at the root of the tree of oppression and iniquity, take care that your axe is sharp. Most efforts of reform are vain attempts to "charm" evils without extracting the sting which makes them venomous. Most reformers are talkers who have to "eat their own words."[2] The most patent facts of experience are hidden from them. They flounder in difficulties, because they do not know the high road to the city.[3] A man must be a fool who cannot find his way to the capital, and the fate of all "blind leaders" will overtake the man who does not keep to the beaten track of experience. These smooth sayings conceal the deep concern of Ecclesiastes for his country.

"Woe to thee, O land, when thy king is a youth, and thy princes eat in the morning."[4] The old school of interpreters heard in this Solomon's prophetic foresight

[1] Plumptre, p. 196. [2] x. 12.

[3] x. 15, "He knoweth not how to go to the city." Evidently a proverbial saying. The prophet Isaiah adapts it by speaking of "the way of holiness" as a highway in which "wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err" (Isaiah xxxv. 8). [4] x. 16.

of the folly of Rehoboam,[1] but we should rather have in our mind's eye a youth like Ptolemy Epiphanes, who was but fifteen years of age when he handled the reins of government.[2] The day began with revels instead of justice and judgment. The nobles, with no nobility of character, rioted in every kind of license. Ecclesiastes draws with a few strokes of the pen the picture of a house in decay.[3] A noble structure is full of rot. The framework is rotten and the house lets in the rain. We hear the "drip, drip, drip," leaking through the roof, the "continued dropping," which is intolerable. Such are the worm-eaten timbers of a corrupt state. The collapse of the whole fabric is inevitable.

"A feast is made for laughter, and wine maketh glad the life, and money answereth all things" (ver. 19). There is no cynicism conveyed in the words "money answereth all things."[4] It is not a general statement. It is simply a picture of the luxurious princes sitting down to their feast in the morning with plenty of money to satisfy their desires. The State may be bankrupt and creditors unpaid, but the money they squeeze from an oppressed province is the Mammon they worship.

The last picture is the darkest. "Curse not the king, no, not in thy thought; and curse not the rich in thy bedchamber: for a bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter" (ver. 20). The words are wrung from painful experience, for the spies of a despotic government are everywhere. There is no security at home or abroad. Ecclesiastes veils his protest in the language of prudence for "walls

[1] 1 Kings xii. 1. [2] Plumptre, p. 200. Ptolemy died 181 B.C.
[3] x. 18 (see also xii. 3) for another description of a building.
[4] x. 19 (A.V.).

have ears," but the spirit of liberty chafes against the gags of despotism. When John Milton was in Italy he visited the famous Galileo, "a prisoner to the Inquisition, for thinking in astronomy otherwise than the Franciscan and Dominican licencers thought." [1] Milton left that dungeon determined to be a free man. He made a rule never to be the first to begin any conversation on religion, but if any questions were put to him concerning his faith, to declare it without reserve or fear.[2] In this spirit this Daniel entered the lion's den at Rome, infested with Jesuit spies. "I took no pains either to conceal my person or my character, and for about the space of two months openly defended the reformed religion in the very metropolis of popery." [3]

Ecclesiastes lived in even more perilous times, and his counsel of reserve was given to a people dogged by the police of a despotic government. But he claimed independence for himself, and his book is one of the earliest charters of liberty,

> to choose
> Hatred, scoffing and abuse—
> Rather than in silence shrink
> From the truth he needs must think.[4]

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[1] *Areopagitica.* [2] *Second Defence of the People of England.*
[3] *Ibid.* [4] J. R. Lowell.

XVII

CASTING BREAD UPON THE WATERS

Not long since a poor man solicited alms at a monastery which was denied him; he demanded the cause why they refused to give for God's sake! The porter of the monastery answered, "We are become poor." Whereupon the mendicant said: "The cause of your poverty is this: ye had formerly in this monastery two brothers —the one named Date (Give), and the other Dabitur (It shall be given). The former ye thrust out—the other went away of himself."—LUTHER'S *Table Talk*, cccxvi., and see R. Browning's poem on this subject, "Date et Dabitur."

O Christ who holds the open gate,
O Christ who drives the furrow straight,
O Christ the plough, O Christ the laughter
Of holy white birds, flying after.
Lo, all my heart's field red and torn,
And thou wilt bring the young green corn,
The young green corn divinely springing,
The young green corn forever singing.
And when the field is fresh and fair,
Thy blessed feet shall glitter there,
And we will walk the weeded field,
And tell the golden harvest's yield,
The corn that makes the holy bread
By which the soul of man is fed.
The holy bread, the food unpriced,
Thy everlasting mercy, Christ.

J. MASEFIELD, "The Everlasting Mercy."

Chapter XI. *verses* 1-8.—Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days.

Give a portion to seven, yea, even unto eight; for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth.

If the clouds be full of rain, they empty (themselves) upon the earth; and if a tree fall toward the south or toward the north, in the place where the tree falleth, there shall it be.

He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap.

As thou knowest not what is the way of the wind [1] nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child; even so thou knowest not the work of God who doeth all.

In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou knowest not which shall prosper, whether this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good.

Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun.

Yea, if a man live many years, let him rejoice in them all; but let him remember the days of darkness, for they shall be many. All that cometh is vanity.

MUCH depends on our view of this book and much on ourselves how we interpret the next words. With a solemn irony we have already noticed, Ecclesiastes purposely veils his meaning. He leaves a good deal to our intelligence, and we shall most likely find just what we are looking for.

I

"Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days." These words have been interpreted simply as a proof of commercial shrewdness. "Send out your ships of merchandise, and by and bye they will return with the profits of your ventures." Sometimes a reference was traced to the sowing of the seed after the inundation of the Nile. There hardly seems any need for these directions. The merchant and the Egyptian husbandmen knew their own business, and

[1] Margin, "spirit."

so do we. Are we not ever looking for that "tide in our affairs" which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune? We may be so entirely regulated by a commercial view of life that when we are asked to explain these words, the prudential and self-regarding seems the most obvious solution. Ecclesiastes took a proverbial saying, and gave it a new setting. It was a Greek proverbial phrase typical of thankless labour. To the Greek, an uncalculating beneficence was like sowing the sea. In Arabia it had a little better associations: "Do good: cast thy bread upon the waters and one day thou shalt be rewarded." [1] It was rendered in a Turkish proverb, "Do good, cast thy bread upon the waters. If the fish know it not, yet the Creator knows." Ecclesiastes develops this idea for more than it was worth as a maxim. He has no affinity with the Greek idea, and bids men not to be afraid to cast their bread even upon the face of the thankless waters. An apparently profitless sacrifice becomes an ungrudging, uncalculating act of love. It brings no tangible return to the giver. You cannot follow "the flat cake" [2] as it floats down the stream. But nothing done in this manner is ever lost. It is the triumph of the spirit over all that keeps our life on low levels of proverbial wisdom. This is not an investment. It comes more from the heart than the head. It is the originality of love. This is not indiscriminate almsgiving that may cost us little and do more harm than

[1] See Plumptre, p. 204, on this proverbial phrase. See also Wright, p. 224.

[2] In the East bread is commonly made in thin flat cakes, something like Passover cakes, and one of these cakes flung on the stream, though it would float for a time, would soon sink, and unlike the grain cast from the boat, yield no visible return. Our charity should be like that (Cox, p. 249).

good. It is a deliberate sowing the world without expecting any definite return—doing thankless tasks. "Thou shalt find it after many days," says Ecclesiastes, with that baffling ambiguity which compels us to interpret his words in the best light we have, and so reveal our character. "To what purpose this waste?" ask your shrewd financiers in all ages. Yet we know that the alabaster box of ointment was not wasted, though it might have been sold for three hundred pence and given to the poor. And to cast bread upon the waters, to do good without any prospect of return, to be generous without calculation is not really unprofitable. It will come back to you—you will find it after many days, as Mary's impulsive loving service came back to her as a rich benediction and an everlasting memorial. "It surely cannot matter to you (says Ruskin) whom the thing helps, so long as you are content that it won't or can't help *you*. But are you content so? Will you build a bit of wall, suppose—to serve your neighbour, expecting no good of the wall yourself? . . . You may get some shelter from the wind under your charitable wall yourself; but do not expect it nor lean on any promise that you shall find your bread again, once cast away. I can only say that of what I have chosen to cast fairly on the waters, myself, I have never yet, after any number of days, found a crumb." [1]

II

Perhaps the best commentary on these words is Ecclesiastes himself. Whilst his book, as it draws to a close, becomes more enigmatic, we see more clearly the triumph of his own character. He is less swayed by

[1] *Fors Clavigera*, vol. i. Letter XIX.

mood, less erratic. His fearless sincerity has saved him from self-deception. Painful though his experience has been, it has not made him bitter—not closed his heart—not shut him up to any comfortable theory of duty as self-preservation. He has been disenchanted, robbed of many hopes, but we find him in the evening of life a generous man. This harvest of character has been of his own sowing. He reaped in sober joy what he had sown in tears. Long ago, he had gone forth a melancholy man, bearing precious seed. The winds had been contrary, and clouds were dark. The rain had descended in tropical fury and many a monarch of the forest had fallen low before the storm. Yet in the morning he had sown his seed and in the evening withheld not his hand. He had sown seeds of truth by the wayside, in stormy places, among the thorns and on good ground. The intellectual spiritual harvest may seem poor, but surely there is occasion for rejoicing when we see a man bringing these sheaves with him—the sower blessed in his own soul and enriching those who received his message. In the closing chapters of the book we see the fruit of his experience. He is like a tree, exposed to every blast, yet planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season: his leaf also shall not wither. The storm has passed, and at evening time there is light. Ignorant of the ways of God, he had not remained a spectator of the travail of life. He had done with his might what his hand found to do. Involved in the mystery of experience, tempted to morbidly choose death rather than life, he had discovered the beauty of the world: Truly the light is sweet, and pleasant it is for the eyes to see the sun.[1] The note of joy resounds as

[1] xi. 7. See *Lavengro*, chap. xxv. "Life is sweet, brother."

his faith rises to heights it has never quite reached before. From peaks flushed by the setting sun he can discern the promise of a vindicating judgment day. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? He hovers on the verge of a glorious hope—hope beyond the grave. The descent of the body may be the ascent of the spirit! "The dust shall return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it." [1]

Ecclesiastes had cast his bread upon the waters, scattered seeds of hope on a dark day, with superb generosity, and found it again, when the sun was setting, in the triumph over his own temperament and a happy conclusion to the whole matter.

III

Ecclesiastes presses home this higher teaching in his own original style. Each clause can be interpreted in a higher or lower way. "Give a portion to seven and also to eight." [2] This enigmatic sentence is again the touchstone of interpreters. Some say "I know what it means: Minimise your risk. Don't put all your eggs into one basket, all your money in one bank. Divide the portion into seven or eight parts as Jacob divided his caravan into two portions as a precautionary measure." But there is an arithmetic which soars above all such prudential calculation. The relation between "six and seven"—"seven and eight" in the Bible is the relation between a definite orthodox number and a glorious indefiniteness. The sufferer Job was encouraged to look to the same wideness in God's mercy. "He shall deliver thee in six troubles: yea, in seven, there shall no

[1] xii. 7. [2] xi. 2.

evil touch thee." [1] The Divine reckoning calculates far above "seven times," to seventy times seven.[2] "Give a portion to seven and also to eight, for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth." Does he predict that "rainy day" we are always looking forward to, against which we make it the business of our life to be prepared? Does he mean: lay as many people as possible under obligation to you, so that when dark days come you will have a host of friends? Any moralist will teach you to be thrifty and worldly wise. Catch the finer spirit of Ecclesiastes. "Hard times may come when your means may be limited. So, seize the present opportunity—enjoy *now* the luxury of doing good." We are equally ignorant of the laws of nature.[3] We are only spectators of their working. We see the deluge of rain and hear the crash which marks the fall of some leafy king of the forest. Are we, then, in the presence of such tremendous forces, to fold our arms and be passive? "He that observeth the wind shall not sow, and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap." [4] If you are waiting for the day which has no risks, for the sky without a cloud, for the circumstances which are all propitious, you may become an authority on the weather, and you will never give yourself away, but your reputation will never be greater than that. Over calculation defeats itself. Watching for opportunities may end in missing them, for amid all uncertainties one thing is certain—if there is no sowing there will be no reaping.

We are ignorant of the origin of life.[5] We only know that we are "fearfully and wonderfully made." We are as mystified by results as by causes. What, then, are we

[1] Job v. 19. [2] St. Matthew xviii. 2.
[3] xi. 3. [4] xi. 4. [5] xi. 5.

to do? We have nothing to do with causes or results and may take comfort from our very ignorance. Our province may be limited to a field, but our work is clearly defined. "In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou knowest not which shall prosper, this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good." This is to live—to find the light sweet and pleasant—to accept bright and dark days alike, and to rejoice in them all.

IV

To "cast thy bread upon the waters" is to live a life of faith inspired by love. Faith is recognised as a reasonable act. All sowing is an act of faith in entire ignorance of the processes of growth. Why should the act of faith depreciate in value when it is transferred to higher things than the ventures of the merchant and the farmer—when it stands for faith in God and the promptings of the heart? Why should we doubt a moral government of the world though we cannot foresee or explain many things that happen? Have faith in God. Faith inspires hope. This kind of hope is not merely a balancing of probabilities—not the vague hope that "springs eternal in the human breast." It has as real a foundation as the hope of the farmer that, if he sows his seed, there will be a harvest, though he does not know whether this field will have a better crop than that, or whether both will be alike good. It is committing our life to God and leaving unknown issues to Him. Love is the inspiration of faith. Love makes faith patient and hope unashamed. Love is the only sower who never fails, never wearies, works from morning till evening, still fresh and active after bearing the burden and heat

of the day. The sowing of love is like shooting an arrow or breathing a song into the air. Yet love's harvest never fails. "Thou shalt find it after many days."

I shot an arrow into the air,
It fell to earth, I knew not where;
For, so swiftly it flew, the sight
Could not follow it in its flight.

I breathed a song into the air,
It fell to earth, I knew not where;
For who has sight so keen and strong,
That it can follow the flight of song?

Long, long afterward, in an oak
I found the arrow, still unbroke;
And the song, from beginning to end,
I found again in the heart of a friend.[1]

V

Ecclesiastes takes his place among "the goodly fellowship of the prophets" by virtue of this message.[2] He surpasses all proverbial wisdom and anticipates the spirit of the New Testament. Jesus Christ is our perfect example. He did good, hoping for nothing again, even to the unthankful and evil. He sowed beside all waters the seed which has been found again, after many days, in the harvest of Christian character. He taught us the divinest use of numbers in the seventy times seven Love is willing to forgive. When the clouds were full of rain and the wind was contrary, no gloomy portents chilled His heart or arrested His hand. "He saved others:

[1] Longfellow.

[2] Even Cheyne admits that it is "not without a breath of courageous faith" (*Job and Solomon*, p. 222).

Himself He could not save." Jesus calls us to follow His steps. "He that loseth his life shall find it." Such is the New Testament rendering of Ecclesiastes, still a paradox, still baffling to common sense, capable of many interpretations, yet still the sublimest law of life. Now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

> They sin who tell us love can die,
> With life all other passions fly,
> All others are but vanity. . . .
> But love is indestructible,
> Its holy flame for ever burneth;
> From Heaven it came, to Heaven returneth.
> Too oft on earth a troubled guest,
> At times deceived, at times oppressed,
> It here is tried and purified.
> Then hath in Heaven its perfect rest:
> It soweth here with toil and care,
> But the harvest time of love is there.[1]

[1] Southey, "The Curse of Kehama."

XVIII

YOUTH AND AGE

Youth, like a jocund wanderer, starteth forth
To take his venturous journey in the world,
And ever, as he goes, he culls those joys
And pleasures growing in his onward path
(Not dulled by insipidity and use),
Keeping fast hold upon the clue of hope;—
The music in the future that he hears
Restrains his backward gaze where all mischance
Is shook unwelcome from his memory.
But, when grave Time showers from his shaking hand
The snow of age, o'ersilvering the crown,
Mingled with notions of eternity,
Then, taketh he his stand upon the hill,
Viewing his downward journey that doth stretch
Into oblivion, through the vale of tombs;
Gathers his mantle o'er his thoughtful brows
O'er reading all the way that he has pass'd,
And loves the world (like an old parting friend)
As feeling he must fade from his abode;
And calls the circle of his comforts round,
Counting them over with a jealous eye;
And maketh much of them and still doth cling
The faster as he steps into his grave
Hopeful of Heaven, yet tenable of earth.

WELLS, *Joseph and his Brethren* (Act I. Sc. vi.).

We are like men in a tennis court, and before our conquest is half won the twilight comes and stops the game; nevertheless, let us keep our places and above all things hold fast to the law of life we feel within.

SHORTHOUSE, *John Inglesant.*

Chapter XI. *verses* 9 to Chapter XII. 7.—Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment.

Therefore remove sorrow from thy heart, and put away evil from thy flesh: for youth and the prime of life are vanity.

Remember also thy Creator in the days of thy youth, or ever the evil days come and the years draw nigh when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them; or ever the sun and the light and the moon and the stars be darkened, and the clouds return after the rain:

In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened, and the doors shall be shut in the street; when the sound of the grinding is low, and one shall rise up at the voice of a bird, and all the daughters of music shall be brought low.

Yea, they shall be afraid of that which is high, and terrors shall be in the way; and the almond tree shall blossom, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and the caper-berry [1] shall fail: because man goeth to his long home and the mourners go about the streets: or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern; and the dust return to the earth as it was, and the spirit return unto God who gave it.

THE Book of Ecclesiastes is generally avoided by young people. The writer seems to take pleasure in recording all his morbid sensations in his diary. But there is another way of regarding the purpose of his book. It is written by a man of wide experience, perhaps, especially for young people.[2] He has made many mistakes, and he does not want the younger generation to repeat them. The confession of Ecclesiastes is that when he looked at life in the morning, he forgot that it was a

[1] Margin: "desire."

[2] See Finlayson, *Maxims of Koheleth*, chap. iii. p. 39.

beautiful cloud. He made too much of the things that pass away—pleasure, knowledge, money—and far too little of things that last—goodness, wisdom, truth. He learnt all this when much of the relish of life had gone, and that, no doubt, gives some of the melancholy tone to his book. He knows life—its dreams and castles, the poetry and the prose. He can remember the time when life was all before him and he had his chance. Perhaps he has thrown it away ; but whatever he has done with it, he can never forget the freshness of the morning, the keen vision, the thrill of hope, and all the glorious crowded opportunities. He is not going to spend the evening of his life in repeating the saddest of words, " It might have been." He will write a book for young people. He does not pose as an example or teach like a schoolmaster. He will tell them his guesses at truth—the half-truths that misled him—his temptations and doubts, and the ultimate conviction wherein he found rest. This is what he has learnt. Life is beautiful.

> Life is worth living
> Through every grain of it,
> From the foundations
> To the last edge
> Of the corner-stone, death.[1]

Live your life to its full capacity. Do not be afraid of being happy. Store your mind with pictures worthy to hang on the walls of memory. But, remember, life is the gift of God. You are not your own master. You are a steward of this health and wealth of promise, for which, one day, you must give account. To remember your Creator in the days of youth is not to become prematurely old. It is to have a long happy morning

[1] W. E. Henley.

with no afternoon of regret, so that whenever the twilight falls you can thank God that you have lived.

"Live while you live," the Epicure would say,
"And seize the pleasures of the present day."
"Live while you live," the sacred Preacher cries,
"And give to God each moment as it flies."
Lord, in my view, let both united be:
I live in pleasures while I live to Thee.[1]

I

Compare the tone of this book with that of other so-called guides to youth. Read the Letters of Lord Chesterfield to his son. The son never escaped the paternal eye. "Let me see my own youth revived in you," writes this man of the world,[2] who had staked his all in a gamble of life and lost. With "the manners of a dancing master" Chesterfield had few qualifications to be the guide of youth. His letters contain the essence of worldly wisdom and never rise above it. "The world must be your grammar."[3] "The Graces, the Graces, remember the Graces."[4] "Were I to begin the world again, with the experience I now have of it, I would lead a life of pleasure . . . stopping short of the pains inseparable from excess."[5] This mentor of conduct, the pink of courtliness, yet blind to all the higher interests, was a typical representative of a cynical age, an age which did not believe it possible to love anything better than the goods of life—an age of which Hoadley was the Bishop and Walpole the minister, and Pope the poet, and Tillotson the ruling Doctor.[6]

[1] Doddridge. See Dr. Johnson's reference to this, *Boswell's Journey to Hebrides*, September 30.

[2] Letter 274.

[3] Letter 27.

[4] Letter 38.

[5] Letter 16.

[6] See Newman's *Critical Essays*, vol. i. ix.

The "Schoolmaster" of Roger Ascham represents another type of counsel.[1] He lived a sheltered academic life and wrote his book especially for young men, from seventeen to seven-and-twenty, "the most dangerous time of all a man's life and most slippery." In stirring times, Roger Ascham's life was singularly placid. He was more a spectator than an actor in the changes that passed over England in the sixteenth century. No trace of storm disturbs the peaceful atmosphere of his book. He was somewhat inclined to favour the "cloistered virtue" which John Milton could never praise.[2] He fears the effects of travel and does not advocate the reading of that book which inspired Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. This schoolmaster, as godly as he was learned, hardly lets his scholars out of school "where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat."

Ecclesiastes writes to young people neither as a cynic nor a recluse. He has never lost the child heart nor feared to "sally out to see his adversary," nor "slunk out of the race." Now his heart is full of tender memories.

> As life wanes, all its cares and strife and toil
> Seem strangely valueless, while the old trees
> Which grew by our youth's home, the waving mass
> Of climbing plants, heavy with bloom and dew,
> The morning swallows with their songs like words—
> All these seem clear and only worth our thoughts.[3]

II

There are some who seem to suggest that the only

[1] *The Schoolmaster*, Cassell's National Library.
[2] *Areopagitica*, Bohn, vol. ii. p. 68.
[3] Robert Browning, *Pauline*.

message of Ecclesiastes is to tell us the time.[1] We simply hear the clock striking the irrevocable hours. An anonymous author has described the face of such a clock.[2]

1. We begin
2. We want
3. We learn
4. We obey
5. We love
6. We hope
7. We search
8. We suffer
9. We wait
10. We forgive
11. We resign
12. We end.

Ecclesiastes says of one hour, at least, "We rejoice." "Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth!" We need not suspect the ironical in these words any more than the unrestrained "Youth on the prow and Pleasure at the helm." He would give to every one the retrospect of a happy childhood and youth. He sees again that early vision that "God hath made everything beautiful in its time." [3] The beauty of youth, the zest of living,—these are the gifts of God. The spring in the step, the buoyancy of the heart, the sparkling eye, the physical strength, the glow of enthusiasm,—these are yours to enjoy to the full. "Let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes." [4]

Perhaps Ecclesiastes is all the more insistent on this counsel because of the difficult depressing time in which he lived. We know some of the crushing problems which weighed on his heart. He would see despondent age shaking its head at the lightheartedness of youth. He would notice, with disapproval, young shoulders acquiring old heads before their time. And so he sang the praises of a natural healthy life in protest against a

[1] See chap. iii.
[2] *Letters which never reached him*, p. 206.
[3] See iii. 11.
[4] xi. 9.

brooding spirit which lost the sunny hours of the morning. Then Ecclesiastes tells the secret of securing this joy as a permanent possession: "Know that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment."[1] This is no after-thought—no qualifying what he has said; no "mourning coach driven through a wedding procession"; no skeleton at the feast. It is the secret of perpetual youth. The happiness we need never be afraid of is the happiness we enjoy as in the sight of God. This judgment of God is no kill-joy. It purifies and ennobles our enjoyment. We cannot do as we like, as the beasts, because man has this pre-eminence over a beast, that he knows the difference between good and evil. The spirit of man goeth upward, whilst the spirit of the beast goeth downward. Ecclesiastes had once doubted this,[2] and the memory of that dark day would give edge to his words. The beast must obey the man; the servant must obey the prince. "Therefore remove sorrow from thy heart and evil from thy flesh, for childhood and youth are vanity."[3] We understand now the force of this favourite word "vanity." He casts no reflection on the beauty of childhood and youth. He does not grudge an hour of youthful happiness. But, the morning will not last: "it is as a cloud that vanisheth away." Therefore, rejoice in the gifts of God and renounce evil in the morning hours, whilst the light is sweet and it is a pleasant thing to behold the light of the sun.

Ecclesiastes has one more word to whisper in the ear of the young: "Remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth."[4] Is this in the nature of a confession?

[1] xi. 9. [2] iii. 21; see Appendix, Note F, on "Man and Beast."
[3] xi. 10. [4] xii. 1.

Had he only exercised a prudential morality and forgotten God in those early days? Perhaps self-indulgence had only been regulated by the thought of retribution. He had drowned sorrow in work and put away evil from his flesh, but had his early life been anything more than self-regarding? Had he ever risen to the sublime ideas of duty, self-sacrifice, and worship? If the young man had no vision, the old man dreams of a better life. Let not Self be the centre of your life. Remember God. Seek something higher than a guileless youth, immunity from pain, a comfortable conscience. Let religion have its proper place in your life. And though Ecclesiastes only reads the primer of Genesis, and only knows God as "Creator," this higher note entitles him to a place above a moralist, as a religious teacher.

This is an attractive picture of youth. Youth has not merely built a lordly pleasure-house.[1] He dwells in a palace of beauty and art, which is equally the abode of religion and joy. The sun is shining in a clear sky. The windows, lit by the golden rays, look out on glorious, boundless prospects. Sounds of life and activity resound everywhere. The lark sings in the heavens and the earth echoes the heavenly harmonies. The almond tree, the messenger of spring, is blossoming; the pitcher is brimming over with water from the fountain.

III

And now we see a very different picture.[2] As the evening shadows gather around Ecclesiastes, all life's pictures seem to fade away except one. He has in his

[1] Chap. iv.

[2] xii. 2-7. See Appendix, Note H, on the "Allegory of Old Age."

mind's eye a fine mansion or castle crumbling to ruin. Once it was a scene of life and industry. With the servants busily grinding corn in the mills or bringing water from the fountain, with the music and revelry by night in spacious rooms lit by the golden lamp suspended by the silver cord, it spoke of happy, peaceful days. But, alas! all has changed. Age has sapped the castle walls and undermined the strength of its keepers. The strong men are bowed down. Those who look out of the lattice windows are terrified by signs of an approaching storm. The doors are shut, and everywhere there is a deathlike stillness. The sound of music has ceased. The house is haunted by nameless terrors. The years have drawn nigh when the aged master says "I have no pleasure in them." The coming of the spring does not appeal to him; the least effort is a burden; nothing can rouse a lost appetite for life. We seem to hear the crash of everything as the silver cord becomes loosened and the golden lamp is shattered; the pitcher is broken at the fountain and the wheel broken at the cistern. At length the venerable pile is deserted. The lordly tenant has gone to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets.

Such is the sombre picture of old age unrelieved by a touch of glory. We need not spoil an impressive scene by seeking to literalise those characteristic features of old age which are softened by a poet's imagery. This is not the common conception of old age in the Bible. Do we not read elsewhere of the hoary head as a crown of glory when it is found in the way of righteousness?[1] Are we not told of those "planted in the house of the Lord who still flourish in old age"?[2] Ecclesiastes is surely

[1] Proverbs xvi. 31. [2] Psalm xcii. 13.

thinking of the evening of a misspent day. This is the cheerless old age of the man who has not remembered his Creator in the days of his youth. But the collapse of the body is not the end of the man. Ecclesiastes finds no rest in his previous doubt of human destiny.[1] His ultimate conviction is no concession to orthodoxy but the triumph of faith. His wanderings to and fro in the mazes of thought end, not in the denial but the affirmation of a personal God, and therefore a personal immortality. "The dust shall return to the earth as it was, and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it."[2]

IV

The Christian message confirms the words of Ecclesiastes, "Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth." It would not shorten life's morning or darken the view. The Christian spirit is utterly opposed to that rehearsal of death suggested by Montaigne in one of the chapters which are among the curiosities of morbid literature. "Let us disarm him of his novelty and strangeness, let us converse and be familiar with him and have nothing so frequent in our thoughts as death. . . . Every day travels towards death: the last only arrives at it."[3] But the Christian spirit does not shrink from the realities of life and death. It is just as alien from the mind of those wanderers who went in search of "The Earthly Paradise."[4] Those adventurers were really frightened fugitives, fleeing from the imagined horrors of age and decay. Those coming events cast shadows on all their joy. They sought

[1] iii. 21. [2] xii. 7.

[3] Montaigne's *Essays*, vol. i. chap. xix., "That to philosophise is to learn how to die." [4] William Morris, *Earthly Paradise*.

a happy land
Where, at the worst, death is so far away
No man need think of him from day to day.[1]

Christianity fears neither life nor death.[2] It echoes every word of encouragement to enjoy the sunny hours, and creates an earthly Paradise here and now. At the same time, it invests life with solemn significance: "Know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment." This thought of judgment should not destroy or neutralise the joy of life, but ennoble it. A great representative Englishman once confessed that the words of Christ, setting some on His right hand and some on His left in a day of judgment, darkened all prospects.[3] But the cloud lifted. That sturdy soul of Johnson had a vision of the celestial city from the land of Beulah which radiated the future with an unearthly glory.[4]

Death, thou wast once an uncouth hideous thing,
Nothing but bones,
The sad effect of sadder grones:
Thy mouth was open, but thou couldst not sing.

But, since our Saviour's death did put some bloud
Into thy face,
Thou art grown fair and full of grace,
Much in request, much sought for as a good.

For we do now behold thee gay and glad
As at doom's day,
When souls shall wear their new array,
And all thy bones with beautie shall be clad.[5]

[1] Prologue, "The Wanderers," *The Earthly Paradise.*
[2] See the Essay, "The Wonder of Death," *I Wonder: Essays for Young People* (Dr. Stephen Paget).
[3] Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, vol. ii. chap. 55 (Pitman).
[4] See Boswell's *Life*, vol. ii. chap. 59.
[5] Herbert, *The Temple*, "Death."

V

It was an incorrigible cynic who wrote, "Youth is an illusion—middle age a disenchantment—old age a regret." The dramatic entrances and exits of men and women on the world's stage from "infancy to second childishness and mere oblivion" may leave us undecided whether we have been watching a comedy or a tragedy. Yet our poets are never tired of singing the freshness of spring, the glory of summer, the tinted autumn, the significant silences of winter. Human life, too, has its seasons of never-failing charm. Each period of life discloses a peculiar beauty of its own, and in the light of Christian revelation life never loses its value. "Young men shall see visions." [1] "Revive Thy work in the midst of the years." [2] "Old men shall dream dreams." [3] In the light of the highest revelation, the past is not irrevocable, the present not prosaic, the future not ominous. The attitude of the Christian seer is not looking backward but forward.

"Young men shall see visions." We may object to our young brother Joseph coming to us with his vision of the sun and moon and eleven stars bowing down to him. We think he has too big an opinion of himself. He may have:—but your brother's faculty of imagination is never to be despised. Your brother who thinks that the world is out of joint and that he was born to set it right, may never do more than set a bone, but he will be all the finer for that larger vision. "Young men shall see visions," and that makes the romance, the poetry, the music, the religion of the world.

The wisdom of modern times has decided that a man

[1] Joel ii. 28. [2] Habakkuk iii. 2. [3] Joel ii. 28.

is too old at forty to realise his visions. This is the modern dictum: "The days of our years are two score years, and if by reason of strength and an obstinate clinging to life they be two score years and ten, yet is that strength fictitious and that obstinacy apparent to everybody, and the sooner the thread of life is snapped the better!" To ban life at forty is an insult to experience. It is to dishonour some of life's choicest possessions—the developed brain, the schooled affections, the disciplined will. To say that God has no more work for such a man, is to say that the whole of life is on a wrong scale; that the long period of infancy and youth, the slow but sure processes of nature, are all a prodigious mistake! Life may be poor "in the midst of the years." Ignoble failure or success may depreciate it. We cannot restore the elasticity of youth. But God's work on earth in us and through us may be only half done. For, if we have lost the early vision, we are inspired to pray, "Revive Thy work in the midst of the years." God still works on the unseen fabric of character in middle age. God is not mocked.

> Be sure that God
> Ne'er dooms to waste the strength He deigns impart.[1]

Middle age can recover the child heart, and enter the kingdom of Heaven.

"Old men shall dream dreams." The dreams of old age are worthy of mention with the visions of youth. A man can be born when he is old.[2] We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out; so the old man with his dreams is no poorer than the young man with his visions. But if the spirit

[1] Robert Browning, *Paracelsus*. [2] St. John iii.

grandly survives—if the heart leaps up to the same sky which was illumined by the rainbow—if hope is in God—then we may well rejoice in such an autumn after such a spring. And "the best is yet to be."

When on my day of life the night is falling,
And, in the winds, through unsunned spaces blown
I hear far voices out of darkness calling
My feet to paths unknown,

Thou who hast made my home of life so pleasant,
Leave not its tenant when its walls decay;
O Love Divine, O Helper ever present,
Be Thou my help and stay!

Be near me when all else is from me drifting:
Earth, sky, home's pictures, days of shade and shine,
And kindly faces to my own uplifting
The love which answers mine.

I have but Thee, my Father! let Thy spirit
Be with me then, to comfort and uphold;
No gate of pearl, no branch of palm I merit,
Nor street of shining gold.

Suffice it if—my good and ill unreckoned,
And both forgiven through Thy abounding grace—
I find myself by hands familiar beckoned
Unto my fitting place.

Some humble door among Thy many mansions,
Some sheltering shade where sin and striving cease,
And flows for ever through heaven's green expansions
The river of Thy peace.

There, from the music round about me stealing
I fain would learn the new and holy song,
And find at last, among Thy trees of healing,
The life for which I long.

WHITTIER, "At Last."

XIX

THE CONCLUSION OF THE MATTER

All things work together for good to them that love God.

Romans viii. 28.

Destiny has two ways of crushing us—by refusing our wishes and by fulfilling them. But he who only wills what God wills escapes both catastrophes. "All things work together for his good."

AMIEL.

"I am like a man," continued my father, "who in some deep wood has been frightened, thinking he has lost his way, and suddenly, coming to the end of it, finds that he has been guided to the right point after all. I cannot tell you what a comfort that is to me."

"What is the right point?" asked Barbara.

"Ah, that I cannot tell you," answered my father. "I only know that for me, it is here where I am."

JEROME, *Paul Kelver.*

I conclude therefore and say, there is no happiness under the sun. "All is vanity and vexation of spirit." . . . Bless me in this life with but the peace of my conscience, command of my affections, the love of Thyself and my dearest friends, and I shall be happy enough to pity Caesar. These are, O Lord, the humble desires of my most reasonable ambition, and all I dare call happiness on earth: wherein I set no rule or limit to Thy hand or providence; dispose of me according to the wisdom of Thy pleasure. Thy will be done, though to my own undoing.

SIR THOMAS BROWNE, *Religio Medici*, Part II. sec. 14.

Chapter XII. *verse* 8 to end.—Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher; all is vanity. And, further, because the Preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he pondered and sought out and set in order many proverbs. The Preacher sought to find out acceptable words; and that which was written uprightly, even words of truth. The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails well fastened are the words of the masters of assemblies,[1] which are given from one shepherd.

And furthermore, my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

This is the end of the matter[2]; all hath been heard: fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole (duty) of man.[3]

For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every hidden thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil.

We have reached the end of this strange diary. It is unlike any other book in the Bible. No one takes us into his confidence like Ecclesiastes. He holds us like that ancient mariner who poured into the ear of the wedding guest his awful tale of the sea.

> O wedding guest! this soul hath been
> Alone on a wide, wide sea:
> So lonely 'twas that God Himself
> Scarce seemed there to be.[4]

But, as that strange poem ends with the wedding bells, so this melancholy tale concludes on a lofty note. Both mariners were finally brought out of their distresses into the desired haven. Ecclesiastes has reviewed "all the works that are under the sun," and is about to say his last word. He has lived in difficult times. It has been

[1] Margin, "collectors of sentences."
[2] Margin, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter."
[3] Margin. "this is the duty of all men."
[4] Coleridge, *Ancient Mariner.*

a life struggle with temperament and depression. He has said many wild and bitter things, and arrived at provisional conclusions only to reject them in the light of a wider experience. "Vanity of vanities" is a cheerless creed and only a half truth, but, if we read this book as the autobiography of one in quest of reality, and these closing words as his ultimate conviction, all the strange things he has seen and said and done fall into their appropriate places.

The literary form and tone of the Epilogue has puzzled some readers.[1] Ecclesiastes is spoken of in the third person, and the commendation seems unusual in an author speaking of his own work. The conclusion, too, is in harmony with the orthodox creed of Israel. For these and other reasons some have thought that the Epilogue was added by a later hand; but this is no refutation of the view that the book is a complete whole. This is not the first time that the author has spoken in the third person [2] for dramatic purposes, and the author, in commending his work, does not offend the canons of modesty as he still remains anonymous. If the book had been originally without this Epilogue, it would hardly have found a place in our Bible. But the spirit and tone of the book throughout are one. In spite of gloomy thoughts the sense of God pervades the whole book. To fall back on the plain practical duties of religion shows how strong was the hold which those duties had, and how hard it was to shake an Israelite's faith.[3] In this conclusion Ecclesiastes simply drops the mask of Solomon and reveals his own features, bearing

[1] See Appendix, Note I, "The Epilogue."
[2] See Prologue.
[3] See Sanday, *Inspiration*, p. 210.

the marks of spiritual conflict and triumph. It is this sure and certain hope of reaching the goal, conveyed to every seeker of truth, which justifies the place of this book in the Bible.

I

"Vanity of vanities, saith Koheleth, all is vanity." So he began—so he ends. If these were the last words of Ecclesiastes, it would be a poor finish. To end with the same dirge with which you began, to arrive at your starting-point, is the way of all pessimism, ancient and modern. But this traveller looks at everything now from a higher standpoint. It is one thing to

> feel the fog in my throat,
> The mist in my face.[1]

It is another thing to stand on high ground with the storm beneath. Ecclesiastes still saw the fog, but he saw also the sun shining above it all. He repeats the old refrain, but now he can see something more than transience in the cloud. He sees something of its power—"that in the cloud of the human soul there is a fire stronger than the lightning and a grace more precious than the rain . . . the cloud of life is to float revealed and illumined upon the floor of Heaven in the day of judgment."[2] The same man who uttered this refrain at the beginning of his quest in a mood of despondent scepticism now repeats it from the higher standpoint of faith. All human effort to explain the destinies of men, apart from God, are in vain. This becomes his distinctive message to his fellow-countrymen. It is no

[1] Browning, "Prospice."
[2] Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, iii. "The Mystery of Life."

mere platitude, no barren orthodox remark coming from him, for it has been driven into him by painful experience and wrung from his heart as an overpowering conviction.

II

Ecclesiastes goes on to explain his fitness for writing his book. He was technically qualified, belonging to that class called "wise men"[1] who are supposed to guide inexperience and solve problems. But he was not content with this reputation. He sought to be a wise teacher and give the fruit of diligent search and mature reflection. This he had already done in the form of proverbs. But he had a special object in writing this book, which had cost him infinite pains. His supreme anxiety was to discover truth which would cheer the hearts of those who were perplexed, presenting it in an attractive form without sacrificing truth to form. Truth has been his aim—truth at any cost.[2] All this has been done under Divine inspiration. God speaks through many minds and experiences to make up that Scripture which is the revelation of His will. All true wisdom is derived from the fountain head—from God Himself. Ecclesiastes illustrates this by a picture from pastoral life.[3] The shepherd uses his goad to drive the flock to fresh pastures. He also uses the tent peg, driven into the ground, to secure the tent at evening. The goad is for stimulus, the tent peg for rest. God uses His teachers in the same way. Just as the goad and the stake are employed by the same shepherd, so the words of the wise which provoke and the proverbial wisdom

[1] xii. 9. [2] See xii. 9-10.
[3] xii. 11. See Ginsburg, p. 472, for this view.

which calms proceed from one source with one good end in view. I suppose Ecclesiastes would have said that his book was like a goad, stimulating, no doubt irritating, yet intended to make us think and find no rest in anything less than God's will. The soul of this man has been restored to see something of the vision granted to the shepherd King of Israel. Strange though life is, he knows it is not left to itself. The sheep are not without care. Both the discipline and the rest, the valley of shadow and the green pastures by still waters, are "given by one shepherd." [1] We hear a dim far-away echo in the heart of Ecclesiastes of the simple faith of Israel. "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want."

III

Ecclesiastes thinks of many other books apart from the sacred writings of Israel which profess to solve the riddle of the Universe, and he says: "As far as these are concerned, my son, beware! Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh." [2] These words could not possibly apply to the scanty literature of the reign of Solomon and point to a time when the teachers of Israel had come in contact with the intellectual resources of other nations.[3] These were embodied in books which promised to lead the blind in the ways of wisdom. There were famous libraries at Alexandria and Thebes. The student might

[1] xii. 11. The "one shepherd" is held to be God (Ginsburg, Delitzsch, Plumptre) (see Ps. xxiii. 1, lxxx. 1), so that the expression involves a claim of divine inspiration.

[2] xii. 12.

[3] *Vide* Plumptre, p. 228.

pore over three hundred volumes which bore the name of Epicurus or four hundred more by his disciple Apollodorus.[1] These and other writings were likely to divert or mystify or unsettle the faith of any young Israelite. Ecclesiastes is the last man to disparage learning. He is an educated man, a lover of books, and though there is no end to the making of books he does not hesitate to add another to the collection. He is warning young people not to expect too much from them. He writes, no doubt, from his own experience, and knows something of the weariness of seeking rest in books and finding none. Marcus Aurelius, the philosopher emperor, a born student, was prompted to give the same counsel in his discourse with himself. "As for books, cast away your thirst after them."[2] This man, with bookish tastes, but with no leisure to gratify them,[3] sought that self-culture which cannot be acquired by mere reading. "You have no leisure to read books—what then? You have leisure to check your insolence. It is in your power to be superior to pleasure and pain."[4]

It was in something of this spirit and with this aim that Ecclesiastes speaks of books. He is, perhaps, specially emphasising the distinction between "many books" and the written word of those specially inspired by the great "Shepherd" of our life. He makes the distinction Sir Walter Scott is said to have made be-

[1] See Plumptre, who dates Koheleth between 240 and 180 B.C. The many books (says Cheyne) are probably such as did not proceed from orthodox sources. We have absolutely no information as to Jewish literature outside the Canon. That there was a heterodox literature has been inferred from Jeremiah viii. 8 (see Peake, "Jeremiah," *Century Bible*).

[2] *Meditations*, ii. 3. [3] *Ibid.* iii. 14. [4] *Ibid.* viii. 8.

tween "The Book" and all others.[1] Ecclesiastes took up again the law of his childhood. He saw now that it was this kindly Light which had led him "o'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent" to the old home of his fathers. This goad had pricked him to the search for truth. This stake had given security to his tent. Ecclesiastes pays his tribute to the value of the Bible and earnestly counsels young people to read it. Martin Luther had the same concern. "The multitude of books is a great evil. . . . The Bible is now buried under so many commentators, that the text is nothing regarded. I could wish all my books were buried nine ells deep in the ground by reason of the ill example they will give, every one seeking to imitate me in writing many books . . . large libraries tend to divert men's thoughts from the one great book, the Bible, which ought, day and night, to be in every one's hand. My hope in translating the Scriptures was to check the so prevalent production of new works and so to direct study to the Divine Word." [2]

IV

The wanderer has reached the end of his journeyings. "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter; all hath been heard: Fear God, and keep His commandments. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every hidden thing, whether it be good or evil." This is the triumph of faith. The "spectres of the mind" are scattered, and there is no trace of bitterness to spoil the last word. It does not sound the mournful

[1] Some of the last words of Scott to Lockhart: "Give me *the* book" (Lockhart's *Life*).

[2] Luther's *Table Talk* (Bohn, DCCCCXL.).

note with which one of the masters concludes his saddest, truest book. "Ah! vanitas vanitatum! Which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? or, having it, is satisfied? Come, children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for the play is played out." [1]

The word "duty" [2] is not used by Ecclesiastes. He reverences the "stern daughter of the voice of God," but rises to a higher conception of life than is implied by a grim sense of duty.

> There are who ask not if thine eye
> Be on them; who, in love and truth,
> Where no misgiving is, rely
> Upon the genial sense of youth;
> Glad hearts! without reproach or blot,
> Who do thy work and know it not.[3]

The certainty of a final judgment of personal character is the Ariadne thread by which Ecclesiastes at last brings himself out of the labyrinth of his scepticism.[4] The vindicator [5] Job looked for, and the vision of judgment Daniel [6] saw, become realities in the prose of Ecclesiastes. He becomes a link of the chain of preparation for the fuller disclosure of Christianity. Ecclesiastes looked for a day when God would be "His own interpreter" and declare the everlasting distinction between good and evil. But the old Hebrew commentators thought this ending too harsh. So they repeated the preceding verse again, to make the book close with a more pleasant thought. This is somewhat

[1] Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*.

[2] xii. 13 (A.V.), "this is the whole (duty) of man." M'Neile translates, "this is every man," meaning that every man is destined for and should be wholly absorbed in this (p. 94).

[3] Wordsworth, "Ode to Duty."

[4] Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 441.

[5] Job xix. 25.

[6] Daniel xii.

alien to the spirit of Ecclesiastes, who never feared to face the truth or toned it down for the sake of form. His last words are "good and evil"—the distinctions which remain when all sophistries are exposed, the appeal to God's throne which is never denied.

V

In spite of all his perplexities Ecclesiastes returns to the simple faith of Israel. When the intellectual prodigal "came to himself" he turned his steps instinctively to the Father's house. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom"—yes, and it is the end of wisdom—it is the conclusion of the whole matter. This is the wisdom we must begin with and the wisdom to which we have to return after all our wanderings in search of something better. "Through devious mazes of thought and act he wandered, seeking for the lost vision of good, and, having found all to be vanity, was led at last to rest, like the dove in the ark, on the broad simplicity of the truth that all man needs for blessedness, in the buoyancy of youth and in the feebleness of age, in the stress of life and the darkness of death and in the day of judgment, is 'to fear God and keep His commandments.'"[1] We leave this brave soul, who followed truth wherever it led him, with his hand on the latch—

> One who never turned his back but marched breast forward,
> Never doubted clouds would break,
> Never dreamed though right were worsted, wrong would triumph,
> Held, we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,
> Sleep to wake.[2]

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[1] A. Maclaren.

[2] Robert Browning, "Asolando."

Did Ecclesiastes say the last word? I look at the four dominant ideas in his mind—the dark side of life, the wisdom of making the best and not the worst of it, reverence due to God, and future judgment—in the light of the New Testament. There has been One amongst us who has taken all the experiences of our life to heart. The Man of Sorrows is acquainted with all our grief. The Son of Man, who had not where to lay His head, shares the restlessness of humanity. Jesus Christ confirms the wisdom of making the most of the commonest blessing. The Son of Man came eating and drinking, a guest at the marriage feast, a transformer of water into wine. He has revealed the Creator as "Our Father in Heaven." We see Jesus going about doing good, saving the lost, forgiving and restoring the sinner, the good Shepherd giving his life for the sheep. In the revelation of Bethlehem, Nazareth, Jerusalem, Calvary, we see the Father. Life and immortality have come to light through His Gospel.

We must all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. There truth and error, light and darkness, good and evil shall be for ever revealed. Yet mercy rejoices against judgment, and in the Father's house there are many mansions.

Was there ever kindest shèpherd
Half so gentle, half so sweet
As the Saviour who would have us
Come and gather round His feet?

It is God: His love looks mighty,
But is mightier than it seems:
'Tis our Father, and His fondness
Goes far out beyond our dreams.

There's a wideness in God's mercy
Like the wideness of the sea;

There's a kindness in His justice
Which is more than liberty.

For the love of God is broader
Than the measures of man's mind,
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind.

If our love were but more simple,
We should take Him at His word,
And our lives would be all sunshine
In the sweetness of our Lord.

APPENDIX

NOTE A

ON JUSTIFICATION OF THE POINT OF VIEW OF THIS BOOK

THE Book of Koheleth, called "Ecclesiastes," is still a subject of controversy, and it is necessary for me to attempt to justify a point of view which is not acceptable to all scholars.

In the study of this book I have examined, chiefly, the following writers who have written since 1860 :—

Ginsburg	*Coheleth or the Book of Ecclesiastes*	1861
Tyler	*Ecclesiastes*	1874
Delitzsch	*Ecclesiastes*	1877
Perowne	Articles in *Expositor*	1879
Wright	*The Book of Koheleth*	1880
Plumptre	"Ecclesiastes," *Cambridge Bible*	1880
Bradley	*Ecclesiastes*	1884
Cheyne	*Job and Solomon*	1887
Finlayson	*Maxims of Koheleth*	1887
Cox	"Ecclesiastes," *Expositor's Bible*	1890
Momerie	*Ecclesiastes*	1891
Robertson Smith	*Old Testament in Jewish Church*	1892
Sanday	*Inspiration.* Bampton Lecture	1893
A. B. Davidson	"Ecclesiastes" in *Book by Book*	1893
Dillon	*Sceptics of the Old Testament*	1895
Driver	*Introduction to Literature of Old Testament*	1898
Briggs	*Introduction to Literature of Old Testament*	1899
Kaufmann	"Was Koheleth a Sceptic?" *Expositor*	1899
Alex. Maclaren	*Expositions of Holy Scripture*	1900
Peake	"Ecclesiastes," Hastings' *Dict. of the Bible*	1901

Siegfried	"Wisdom Literature," Hastings' *Bible Dict.*	1901
M'Neile	*Introd. to Ecclesiastes.* Cambridge	1904
Cornill	*Introd. to Canonical Books of Old Testament*	1907
Barton	"Ecclesiastes," *Internat. Crit. Com.*	1908
Davison	*Wisdom Literature of Old Testament*	1912
Buchanan Gray	*Critical Introduction to Old Testament*	1912
Charles	*Eschatology*	1913

Most, if not all, scholars have decided that the book belongs to a much later date than the age of Solomon. This is hardly a question now in debate, though I have discussed it in the Introduction. The critical question to-day is : Is the book, as we now read it, by one author or by several writers or editors ? Some critical scholarship to-day denies the integrity of the book. The original Ecclesiastes, it is said, was a work of unrelieved pessimism. The author was without God and without hope in the world. This original work has been interpolated and adorned with orthodox allusions to God and judgment, and a happy conclusion, in order to bring it into harmony with the Canon of Scripture. Ecclesiastes is said to be the work of many hands. Siegfried can detect the workmanship of at least nine people in the last chapter of fourteen verses. But even Barton, who takes a gloomy view of the book, admits that Siegfried has overworked the theory of interpolation, and Cornill dismisses it with some impatience. It suggests the point raised by Sanday that, if the book had originally been without these redeeming features, it is more probable that it would have been left out of the Canon than manipulated in order to make it worthy of inclusion. A pious scribe would have passed it by.

The opinions of the book may be roughly divided into three :

1. Those who deny its integrity and happy conclusion.
2. Those who leave critical questions open.
3. Those who accept the book as a record of one man's struggle and triumph.

(1) The arguments which deny the integrity and happy conclusion of the book are stated principally by Cheyne,

Peake, Siegfried, M'Neile, and Barton. These scholars base their view of a divided authorship on the numerous contradictions in the book. These contradictions are said to be so radical that they could not have been uttered by the same mind. They are self-contradictory. No one can deny these contradictions. But they are open to reasonable explanations. Some of them consist in contrasts which the author is not able to explain or adjust. *E.g.* how "vanity of vanities, all is vanity," can harmonise with the fear of God (i. 2 and v. 7). Some of these contradictions consist of questions which are capable of a double answer. *E.g.* Whether the spirit of man goes downward or upward (iii. 21 and xii. 7). Some of them are due to the contradictory moods of a sensitive man. *E.g.* That death is better than life (iv. 2). That a living dog is better than a dead lion (ix. 4). "His was a nature full of contradictory elements (says Cornill); in his body lived two souls, in head a Greek, in heart a Jew. . . . So it is not in the least a matter of surprise that a mass of contradictoriness is revealed. In forming an estimate of Koheleth, we should not forget Kant's teaching, that though pure reason can never prove the existence of God and the reality of a metaphysical world, yet the practical reason must hold on unreservedly to both as postulates, without which it cannot act."

Driver corroborates this view of Koheleth. "The views expressed are not perfectly consistent—evidently they reflect the author's changing moods, and these, for some reason, he has presented side by side without always bringing them into logical connection with each other. The contradictions in his book spring out of the conflict between his faith and his experience—his faith that this world is ordered by God and his experience that events often do not fall out as he would have expected God to order them."

The valuable monograph on the Book of Ecclesiastes by M'Neile has reopened the question of its integrity (1904). Whilst admitting that Siegfried is "unnecessarily

ruthless in his dissection," M'Neile regards Ecclesiastes as a "threefold cord" made up of an original writer and two commentators, one of whom supplied the moral and the other the religious teaching. Yet it can hardly be said that M'Neile's criticism furnishes any argument against the integrity of the book which cannot be found in Cheyne's earlier work (1887). He admits that his view is in opposition to the "great majority" who represent the book as depicting different phases of thought alternating between sceptical doubt and religious faith, in which faith at last proves triumphant (p. 27). He credits Ecclesiastes with some of the sublimest thoughts in the book, *e.g.* "Who can eat, or who can enjoy apart from Him?" (*i.e.* God). (Eccles. ii. 25). "He hath placed eternity in their heart." (Eccles. iii. 11). "Every man to whom God hath given riches or possessions, and hath granted him the power of using them and of taking his portion and of being glad in his toil; this is a gift from God" (Eccles. v. 19). "The dust shall return to the earth as it was, and the spirit[1] unto God who gave it" (Eccles. xii. 7). This author does not regard Ecclesiastes as a pessimist (p. 15). "Whilst he is tempted to think of the Deity as the sum-total of the irresistible and inscrutable forces which govern the world, Ecclesiastes has not quite lost his Semitic belief that God is more than nature. His Semitic earnestness and bitter disappointment at the wrongs of the world prevent him from acquiescing in any Greek complacency as a *summum bonum*" (p. 53). These concessions seem to leave plenty of room for the view of the "great majority" that the Book of Ecclesiastes is a unity and a story of struggle and triumph.

(2) Many scholars, though inclined to doubt the integrity of Koheleth, are content to leave this critical question an open one. Driver admits that the conclusion of the whole matter (xii. 13) lays stress upon a thought *implicit* in the

[1] The Hebrew *rūakh* (translated, "spirit") means "the personal conscious spiritual side of man" (Cheyne).

teaching of the book, though it disregards that which is *explicit*. The Epilogue was perhaps added by an editor for the purpose of stating distinctly what he conceived to be the true moral of the book, and disarming possible objections to the general tenor of its teaching. But Driver's last word leaves the question open.[1] Even Cheyne, who could not accept the view of Koheleth's recovery of faith, says, "It is impossible to give a conclusive refutation of this view: . . . It may be that the author did return to the faith of his childhood . . ., he certainly never lost his theism. . . . It may be that history taught him at last to believe in the Divine guidance of the fortunes of Israel. . . . In spite of appearances Ecclesiastes builds upon a true Israelitish foundation." [2]

(3) The Unity of the book has been maintained by representative scholars, such as Ginsburg, Delitzsch, Plumptre, Wright, Briggs, Cornill, A. B. Davidson, Sanday. Ginsburg regards the book as a systematic discussion of the *summum bonum*, and endeavours to trace the course of the argument along which he thinks the writer advances by definite steps towards the final solution of the problem. Delitzsch calls the book "The song of the fear of God," in opposition to Heine's title, "The song of scepticism." Plumptre describes it as "the record of the struggle, the fall, the recovery of a child of Israel." Wright calls Koheleth "The last of the Hebrew prophets." Briggs classes "Koheleth" with Job as a type of moral heroism wrestling with foes and winning moral victories over doubt and error. Cornill declares that "Old Testament piety nowhere enjoys a greater triumph than in the book of Koheleth." Kaufmann says, "The book in its recoil from the world prepares the way for Christian conceptions of life and duty." A. B. Davidson says, "No book of Scripture can be justly estimated apart from the age to which it belongs. The Preacher belonged to Israel's dark age. The reflecting

[1] See discussion of the Epilogue, Note I.
[2] Cheyne, *Job and Solomon*, pp. 202, 250.

religion of his day differed from the intuitional, fervid religion of the prophets as much as the colourless piety of the eighteenth century did from the faith of the Reformation. But the apologetics of the eighteenth century were suitable to the time. And the Preacher, when rightly understood, is seen to furnish a powerful apologetic for his time. His deep sympathy with men in their sorrow and the undertone of melancholy in his mind enable him to speak with effect. He has gauged the evil fully. Then, in spite of the evil, his faith in God and His moral rule and in human duty, remain unshaken." "It is not to be contended," says Sanday, "that Ecclesiastes is on the highest plane of Old Testament revelation, still less on that of the New, but it has a plane of its own. Just as there was room, and more than room, for a St. Thomas among the Apostles, so also there is a fitting place for this grave and austere thinker among the wise men of Israel. In spite of all his perplexities the author still comes back to the simple faith of Israel." Cheyne recommends students to specially study Plumptre and Delitzsch on this book. The point of view of the present writer is based upon their interpretation.

NOTE B

ON THE NAME ECCLESIASTES OR KOHELETH

The name "Ecclesiastes" comes from the Greek version of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint, but the title of the author in the text is Koheleth. This feminine word (used in a masculine sense) is not found elsewhere in the Old Testament, and has puzzled scholars. It means, literally, "either one who calls or one who is a member of an assembly." Our word "Preacher" (says Plumptre), adopted from Luther, is misleading. He would discard it in favour of "debater." Cheyne suggests "the ideal teacher." The Revisers suggest in the margin "the great

orator." Ginsburg renders "an assembler of people into the presence of God." M'Neile prefers to regard Koheleth as a proper name or *nom de plume* of one who deliberately coined a new word for his own distinctive message. "The meaning, therefore, of the title Koheleth probably is 'a (recognised and official) speaker in an assembly,' the assembly, no doubt, being all men who give their hearts to wisdom, and who are metaphorically pictured as sitting at the feet of the wise man." [1]

NOTE C

HOW THE BOOK OF KOHELETH WAS INCLUDED IN THE CANON

The admission of Koheleth into the Old Testament canon was not finally sanctioned until the second synod of Jamnia, A.D. 118. Different schools of thought were strongly divided in their opinion of it. The school of Shammai objected to the book because of its contradictory sayings; the school of Hillel accepted it because, in spite of these admitted contradictions, the beginning and the end of it were considered to be in harmony with revealed truth. It was finally accepted in deference to its teaching on judgment and the conclusion of the whole matter.[2] Cheyne has said that the arguments urged on both sides were such as belong to an uncritical age.[3]

At the same time, no book of the Bible (with the exception of Esther and Song of Solomon) has passed through more searching tests.

(1) The Book of Koheleth was known to the author of Ecclesiasticus, the Wisdom of Jesus, son of Sirach, who wrote about 180–175 B.C.[4] He approved of its teaching, and in many cases paraphrased its thought.

[1] M'Neile, *Introduction to Ecclesiastes.*
[2] See Wright and Sanday.
[3] Cheyne, *Job and Solomon*, p. 280.
[4] Barton, Introduction.

(2) It was known to the author of the Book of Wisdom (145–117 B.C.), who manifestly attacks its teaching. Words of Koheleth (chap. ix. 7-9) are detached from their context and put into the mouth of the ungodly libertines of Alexandria (Wisdom ii. 6-10).

(3) Koheleth is quoted with the formula, "It is written," in a Talmudic story of a conversation in the reign of Alexander Jannaeus (105–79 B.C.).[1] The King said to him (Simon ben Shetach), the king's brother-in-law, "Why didst thou mock me by saying that nine hundred sacrifices were required, when half would have been sufficient?" Simon answered, "I mocked thee not; thou hast paid thy share and I mine . . . as it is written, 'For the protection of wisdom is as the protection of money': a literal quotation from Ecclesiastes vii. 12."[2]

(4) Another story from the Talmud refers to the time of Herod the Great (37 B.C.). Herod often used to go about disguised in the garb of a private citizen in order to ascertain the feelings of the Jews towards himself and his government. He visited a Rabbi ben Buta (who by his order had been deprived of sight) in this disguise, and complained bitterly to him of the tyrannical yoke to which the Jews were subjected. "See," said the disguised king, "what this wretched slave (the king) is doing!" "And what can I do to him?" was the reply of the Jew. "Curse him, master," rejoined his visitor. "Curse not the king, no, not in thy thought," said ben Buta, quoting the words of Koheleth (x. 20).[3]

(5) There is also a version of Koheleth including the Epilogue, in the Septuagint version, which (says Cheyne), we have no sufficient reason for doubting, goes back to one of the last centuries before Christ.

This and other evidence goes to prove that Koheleth was accepted and quoted as Scripture centuries before it was finally admitted at the Council of Jamnia, A.D. 118:

[1] Sanday, Lecture 2.
[2] M'Neile.
[3] See Wright, p. 10.

The difficulties about the book (says Wright) seem to have been fairly examined and discussed again and again by men versed in Scripture. No attempt seems to have been made to stifle discussion on any such points by any *a priori* theory of inspiration. The ground of any objection to Koheleth (says Sanday) was, first, because it was inconsistent with itself; secondly, inconsistent with the Psalter; thirdly, it contained doubtful doctrine—all natural criticisms, and which are made on a larger scale to-day. But Koheleth survived them.

(1) Was this due to the name of Solomon being attached to it? This is not sufficient to account for it. The Wisdom of Solomon (a very attractive book, says Charles)[1] is much more orthodox. To the unbelieving Solomon of Koheleth this author opposes a genuinely Jewish pious and orthodox Solomon. The Wisdom of Solomon was regarded as canonical, we are told, by the fathers Origen and Cyprian. It struggled for recognition for a hundred and eighty years, but failed to gain a permanent place in Scripture.[2]

(2) It is asserted by some scholars that Koheleth was finally admitted into the Canon after additions had been made by orthodox scribes, who endeavoured to correct the tendency of the original work.[3] But the conclusion of A. B. Davidson and others regarding its integrity cannot easily be set aside. "The Book has many peculiarities, but it has a general idea running through it. It is no collection of unconnected fragments, nor mere reflections which the author has transferred from a note-book: . . . In some parts of the book the connection may appear loose, but that the author had a general idea in his mind is in no way to be questioned. The author's aim was practical, and not exclusively speculative. No doubt he touches on various mysteries which have been subjects of speculation at all times, but he does not pursue these matters out of a speculative interest in them merely, but rather to discover

[1] See Charles, *Between Old and New Testament*, p. 202.
[2] Cheyne, *Job and Solomon*.
[3] See Note I, on Epilogue.

and teach how human life should be lived in the face of them. This peculiar state of mind is the product of two general causes: the wretched conditions in his day and a general religious tone of mind common with his contemporaries."[1]

NOTE D

"HE HATH SET THE WORLD[2] IN THEIR HEART"

(1) This marginal reading of the Revised Version is an improvement on the text. The Hebrew word translated "world" (*ōlām*), constantly appears in the Old Testament as "for ever," "everlasting," "eternal." No other meaning but that of duration, the end or beginning of which is hidden from us, and which therefore is infinite or at least indefinite is ever connected with the word in the Old Testament (Plumptre).

(2) Does *ōlām* mean "world"? asks Delitzsch.[3] This meaning (he says) is not known to Biblical language. In itself, the thought that God has placed the whole world in man's heart is not untrue, but that is not the thought here. It is man conditioned by time, but in his innermost nature related to eternity. The author meant to say that God has not only assigned to each, individually, his appointed place in history, but that He has also established in man an impulse leading him beyond that which is temporal toward the eternal: it lies in his nature not to be contented with the temporal, but to break through the limits which it draws round him, to escape from the bondage, and amid the ceaseless changes of time to console himself by directing his thoughts to eternity.

(3) This is the uniform meaning of the word in this book. Chap. i. 4, 10, ii. 16, iii. 14, ix. 6, xii. 5. The thought expressed is, not that of the hope of immortality, but

[1] Davidson, *Book by Book*, p. 186. [2] Margin, "eternity."
[3] *Commentary*, chap. iii.

rather the sense of the infinite which precedes it, and out of which at last it grows.

(4) All scholars agree as to the meaning of the word as used in the Old Testament, but some are reluctant to admit such a conception in the thought of Koheleth. With this bias, Barton says, "To say that God has put eternity in their heart so that they cannot find out the work of God from beginning to end," makes no sense. It is true (he says) that in Koheleth the word has the meaning "for ever" and "eternal," but that is no reason why it might not have another meaning here. Barton accepts another reading, and translates "He has put ignorance in man's heart." Cheyne is equally inconsistent, though perfectly frank in the confession of personal preference.[1] He translates the word *ōlām* in chap. xii. 5, "eternity," explaining that "Man is on his way to his eternal home. The Hebrew here expresses perpetuity." The same word Cheyne translates "world" in chap. iii. 2, but with the note, "I still prefer the explanation (world) *in spite of the fact that ōlām nowhere else occurs in the sense of 'world'* (the present order of things), so common in later Hebrew." It is interesting to note that the American revisers of Ecclesiastes recommend the translation "eternity" in the text.

NOTE E

THE IDEA OF JUDGMENT IN KOHELETH

Wright calls Koheleth the last of the Hebrew prophets by virtue of his belief in God, in judgment, and in the final victory of goodness. For the same reason Delitzsch called the Book of Koheleth "the song of the Fear of God." Those who regard any mention of Divine judgment present or to come, as interpolations, cannot accept this, but to detach all such passages as foreign to Koheleth's thought

[1] See Cheyne, *Job and Solomon*, p. 210. The italics which follow are not in the original.

is to do violence to the context. The thought of God and judgment runs through the whole book from beginning to end. " The critics who are anxious to clip this book into uniformity of teaching (says Davison) have proposed to delete several verses as interpolations, but they will be compelled to mutilate the text much further before they can banish the element of piety which is discernible, even in the writer's darker moods."

(1) While in the Book of Esther (says Delitzsch) faith in God remains so much in the background that there is nowhere in it express mention of God, the name God occurs in Ecclesiastes no fewer than thirty-seven times, and in such a way that the naming of Him is at the same time a confession of Him as the true God, the Exalted above the world, the Governor and Ruler over all. It contemplates the world as one that was created by God very good and as arranged, and directed so that men should fear Him.[1]

(2) Chapter II. *verse* 26.—" God giveth to a man that is good in His sight wisdom and knowledge and joy : but to the sinner He giveth travail."

This is an idea to which Koheleth returns over and over again. Looking at the broad facts of life, and excluding cases apparently exceptional and perplexing, he saw that God does make a distinction even here and now, between the " sinner " and " the man who pleaseth Him." [2]

(3) Chapter III. *verses* 16 and 17.—" I saw under the sun the place of judgment that wickedness was there. . . . I said in mine heart, God shall judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time *there* for every purpose and every work."

The emphatic " there is a time *there* " (says Plumptre) may only refer to the unfathomed depths of the Divine judgment, or it may express a passing belief in a judgment after death redressing the wrongs of earth. The delay of judgment is the cause why " the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil " (chap. viii. 11).

[1] See chiefly Ecclesiastes vii. 29, viii. 12. [2] Finlayson.

Cheyne agrees that the word "there" stands emphatically for "in the other world," and therefore cannot accept it as Koheleth's own thought; but he is not supported in this conclusion by Plumptre or Delitzsch. Bradley makes the most of it. "It is the first glimpse that we have of such a hope among the darker thoughts that cross him —there, before God's throne—there, not here, every purpose, every thought, and every deed shall have its time, its hour. *i.e.* of trial and retribution."

(4) Chapter VIII. *verses* 12 and 13.—"Though a sinner do evil an hundred times and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before Him. But it shall not be well with the wicked."

His faith is gaining strength that the righteousness of God which seems to be thwarted by the anomalies of the world will, in the long run, assert itself.[1] It was a true critical instinct which made Matthew Arnold see in these words the conviction which redeems the apparent "sceptical suspension of Koheleth's judgment."[2] The two perceptions, "Righteousness tendeth to life" and "the ungodly prosper in the world," are left confronting one another in Job, Ecclesiastes, and Malachi. But the former remains indestructible. Malachi, probably almost contemporary with the Preacher, felt the pressure of the same circumstances, and had the same occasion for despondency. All around him people were saying, "Where is the God of judgment?" But Malachi answers, "Unto you that fear my Name shall the Sun of Righteousness arise with healing in his wings."

(5) Chapter XI. *verse* 9.—"Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth . . . but know that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment."

"Koheleth does not draw the pictures of Gehenna and Paradise of which his countrymen were learning to speak. He will not map out a country he has not seen. But the

[1] Plumptre. [2] *Literature and Dogma.*

facts on which he dwells—the life of ignoble pleasure or tyranny or fraud carried on successfully to the last, the unequal distribution of the pleasures and pains of life (all the facts which roused him to write his book and gave it its complexion), all this leads to the conclusions that the 'judgment' which the young man is to remember stretches far into the unseen future of the eternal years. Faith at last comes in where Reason fails, and the man is bidden to remember in all the flush of life and joy that 'judgment' comes at last, if not in man's present stage of being yet in the great hereafter" (Plumptre, *Cambridge Bible*, "Ecclesiastes," p. 212).

(6) Chapter XII. *verse* 14.—"God shall bring every work into judgment with every secret thing, whether it be good or evil" (see Note I, on Epilogue).

NOTE F

ON MAN AND BEAST

Chapter III. *verses* 18, 21.—"I said in mine heart, It is because of the sons of men that God may prove them, and that they may see that they themselves are but as beasts. For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath. . . . Who knoweth the spirit of man whether it goeth upward and the spirit of the beast whether it goeth downward to the earth?"

This is a dark and difficult passage in this book, and it speaks volumes for the value of Koheleth that in spite of words which sound like the language of materialism, it should have found its place in the Canon of Scripture. The strong probability is that this dark mood of Koheleth would have excluded him from a place in Scripture, but for the ultimate conclusion that whilst the dust returns to the

earth as it was, the spirit returns unto God who gave it.[1] It confirms our view of the integrity of the book.

Is it possible to tone down the apparent materialism conveyed in these words ?

(1) Plumptre translates " The sons of men are beasts—*they by themselves.*" The thought emphasised is that without a higher faith of some kind (such as in v. 17) man stands much on the same level as other animals. In the words of an old English poet :

> Unless above himself he can
> Erect himself, how poor a thing is man !

(2) The question, " Who knoweth whether the spirit of man goeth upward ? " is certainly left unanswered except in so far as it is answered in xii. 7. (Unless we accept the marginal reading of the Revisers, " Who knoweth the spirit of man *that goeth* upward, and the spirit of the beast *that goeth* downward to the earth ? ") But Koheleth has been unduly criticised for his failure to grasp the doctrine of a future life. This doctrine, Driver reminds us, " formed no part of the established creed of an Israelite. Though there are passages in the prophets which contain this great truth in germ, and though it is expressed at certain sublime moments by some of the Psalmists (Ps. xvi., xvii., xlix., lxxiii.), yet these passages are few in number. Koheleth shares only the ordinary old Hebrew view of a shadowy half-conscious existence in Sheol " (iii. 19, vi. 6, ix. 5), though he gropes after something better.

(3) Those who deny any redeeming features in Koheleth cannot believe that the same man could have written the doubt whether the spirit of man were more immortal than the beast (chap. iii. 21), and also expressed the conviction of the ascent of the spirit (xii. 7). But even Barton, who takes a gloomy view of the book, says, " One may have his pessimistic moods in which he questions whether anybody knows whether a man's spirit differs from a beast's . . .

[1] xii. 7.

and still holding faith in God, write 'the spirit shall return to God who gave it.'" Koheleth's thought is not out of harmony with the later development of Old Testament Judaism on this subject.

Ginsburg goes further than this, and strongly asserts that Koheleth's final utterances on the soul's return to God (xii. 7) repudiates his doubt in iii. 21. "It is admitted by all parties that the words, 'the spirit goeth upward' (iii. 21), mean immortality just as the contrary phrase, 'the spirit goeth downward,' denotes mortality. Those who are anxious to show that Koheleth denies the immortality of the soul, triumphantly appeal to this very phrase. Now we submit that the phrases, 'the spirit goeth upward' (iii. 21) and 'the spirit returning to God' (xii. 7), are essentially the same; and if the former means immortality of the soul it is an outrage to the laws of language to deny the meaning to the latter."[1]

NOTE G

THE IGNORANCE OF MAN

Chapter VIII. *verse* 17.—"I beheld all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun: because, however much a man labour to seek it out yet he shall not find it. . . ."

Bishop Butler's sermon on "The Ignorance of Man" is based on this passage in Koheleth. These thoughts are expanded in the famous *Analogy of Religion*. There was much in the eighteenth century to bring home human ignorance. The discoveries of Copernicus and Newton had enlarged the boundaries of knowledge, and at the same time revealed an abyss of human ignorance. The Universe had become more vast, but man seemed to be much smaller. The enemies of religion made the most of it. How, they

[1] Ginsburg, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, p. 469, and see Note I, on Epilogue.

asked, is it possible to believe that a God who is the Creator and Governor of so stupendous a universe can concern Himself with the affairs of man or make any special revelation to such an insignificant being? Butler perceived that the weapon furnished by the extent of man's ignorance was really double-edged. He saw that it might be used no less effectively against the objectors of religion as against its supporters. For, if man lives in such a remote and unimportant corner of the Universe, how certain it is that he can form but an imperfect inadequate notion of the scheme of the universe as a whole, and of the ends to which it is directed? He is not in a position to criticise any of the detail of the arrangements of the world in which he lives. Yet he has been given sufficient light to show him what are the lines on which he should live. Not knowledge, but conduct, is the end of human life.[1]

Newman expressed the same thought, "Revelation was not given to us to satisfy doubts, but to make us better men."[2] Walter Bagehot went further than Butler in his essay on "The Ignorance of Man."[3] Were truths, such as the moral superintendence of God, His reward of virtue, punishment of vice, forced upon our minds by overwhelming evidence, so that we could feel no doubt about them, would not the inevitable result be that, in spite of ourselves, we should be rendered virtuous by nothing else than the hope of reward, and be deterred from vice solely by the fear of punishment. As things are now, the truths of Christianity are confirmed by our deepest moral convictions.[4]

It is something akin to this spirit that Koheleth expresses in his so-called *Agnosticism*. He has no affinity with the modern dogma which we associate with the name of Spencer. "The limits of human knowledge recognised by Koheleth are only such as those which St. Paul acknowledged when he said, 'We know in part, and we prophesy

[1] See Spooner, *Life of Butler*, chap. iii.
[2] *Parochial Sermons*, xviii.
[3] *Literary Studies*, vol. ii., Appendix (Everyman's Library).
[4] See A. Clutton-Brock, *The Ultimate Belief*.

in part.' It is not the impossibility of apprehending the Divine existence of which the Preacher speaks, but the impossibility of comprehending all the order of His Providence—quite another matter."[1] Hooker's confession is in keeping with the same thought. "Dangerous it were for the feeble brain of man to wade far into the doings of the Most High; whom, although to know be life, and joy to make mention of His name, yet our soundest knowledge is, to know that we know Him not as indeed He is, neither can know Him; and our safest eloquence concerning Him is our silence when we confess without confession that His glory is inexplicable, His greatness above our capacity and reach."[2]

NOTE H

THE ALLEGORY OF OLD AGE

Chapter XII. *verses* 1 to 7.—"1. Remember also thy Creator in the days of thy youth, or ever the evil days come, and the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them.

"2. Or ever the sun and the light and the moon and the stars be darkened and the clouds return after the rain:

"3. In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened, and the doors shall be shut in the street.

"4. When the sound of the grinding is low, and one shall rise up at the voice of a bird and all the daughters of music shall be brought low.

"5. Yea, they shall be afraid of that which is high, and terrors shall be in the way; and the almond tree shall blossom and the grasshopper shall be a burden and the

[1] Davison, *Wisdom Literature*, "Ecclesiastes."
[2] *Ecclesiastical Polity*, Book I. 2.

caperberry (desire) shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets.

"6. Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern.

"7. And the dust return to the earth as it was, and the spirit return unto God who gave it."

The spirit in which this allegory should be interpreted is indicated by Dean Bradley. "We turn from the long-drawn anatomical explanations of men who would replace with a dissector's report a painter's touch, a poet's melody."[1]

The explanations of this allegory have been mainly these.[2]

(1) It is a diagnosis of the physical phenomena of old age and its infirmities. Each metaphor represents some bodily organ in the author's mind. This has exercised the ingenuity of interpreters in whom the sense of true poetic imagination is almost extinct.

(2) It is a picture of an old man's death under the figure of a storm.

(3) The approach of death is pictured under the fall of night.

(4) The passage is a literal picture of the gloom in a household when the master has just died.

(5) The verses are in general a picture of old age, but one line of thought is not followed throughout. The metaphors change and intermingle in accord with the richness of an Oriental imagination.

(6) The view taken in this book is that the characteristic features of old age are mainly presented under the emblems of a mansion or castle crumbling to ruin amid the oncoming of a storm.[3]

The rendering of this allegory is not without difficulties.

Verse 3 may be taken quite literally as the effect of terror on the inmates of the house.

[1] *Lecture on Ecclesiastes*, p. 130.

[2] But see Barton, p. 186.

[3] See Finlayson, *Maxims of Koheleth*.

Verse 4.—" One shall rise up at the voice of a bird "—may mean the sleeplessness of age, waking at a sparrow's chirp, or (in Plumptre's translation) " the bird (crane or swallow) rises in the air with a cry."

" The daughters of music " may mean the birds that sing most sweetly, the nightingale or thrush, or possibly the singing women (ii. 8) whose occupation is gone in a time of terror.

Verse 5.—The interpreters who carry the idea of a storm through the whole passage explain, " they shall be afraid of that which is high " as " they shall be afraid of that which is coming from on high," *i.e.* storm clouds. " The almond tree shall blossom, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and the caperberry (desire) shall fail."

Ginsburg translates " the almond shall be despised, the locust shall be loathed, and the caperberry shall be powerless, *i.e.* no dainties shall appeal to the appetite." But, if we reject this physical application, others are offered.

(1) The almond tree (says Plumptre) signifies " the early waking tree " (Jeremiah i. 11). The enigmatic phrase describes the insomnia which often attends old age.

(2) " The almond tree blossoms " represent the white hairs of age. These blossoms are, however, pink and not white (Plumptre).

(3) It may mean " old age turns away from the almond tree," *i.e.* has no welcome for any sign of the coming of spring of which the almond tree is a messenger.

" The grasshopper shall be a burden." The word translated " grasshopper " is one of the many terms used for insects of extreme insignificance (Numbers xv. 33). " The least thing is a burden to old age."

" The caperberry (or ' desire ') shall fail." These berries stimulate the appetite. Hence the caperberry was called " desire " (Ginsburg). " The desire for life shall fail or everything shall fail to stimulate the old man's appetite."

" Because man goeth to his long home," literally " to the house of his eternity." The phrase (Ginsburg) is in common use among modern Jews as meaning the grave.

Verse 6.—"Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher broken at the fountain." These figures are symbolic of the actual dissolution of soul and body. The golden bowl (Zechariah iv. 3, 4) is the vessel or reservoir from which the oil flowed into the lamp. The lamp itself (says Plumptre) was the symbol of life. "The silver cord" is the chain by which the lamp hangs, *i.e.* that on which the continuance of life depends. By another common figure life is likened to a fountain (Psalm xxxvi. 9). There will come a day when the pitcher shall be taken to the fountain for the last time and be broken in the very act of drawing water.

The allegory of old age and death would not be complete without the requiem which finds an echo in the familiar words of the burial service—"Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust." But this is not the last word. It is not too much to call the last word (says Plumptre) the victory of faith. The same man who had asked, "Who knoweth whether the spirit goeth upward?" now declares, "The spirit shall return to God who gave it." The faith of the Israelite, which the writer must have learnt in childhood, was not extinguished. The "fear of God" is with him a real feeling. Rightly, from this point of view, has the Targum paraphrased the words, "The spirit will return to stand in judgment before God who gave it thee." The long wandering to and fro in many paths of thought ends not in the denial but the affirmation of a personal God, and therefore personal immortality.[1]

[1] See Plumptre, *Cambridge Bible*, p. 224. M'Neile accepts the words of Ecclesiastes, "the spirit shall return unto God who gave it," but he gives it a pantheistic interpretation. He thinks it shows how near Hebrew thought could approach to Greek ideas of re-absorption into the Infinite Being. But this interpretation is open to many objections, and certainly does not agree with the last verse of the book. And Cheyne explains the word "spirit" as the personal conscious spiritual side of man, in opposition to the view of absorption.

NOTE I

THE EPILOGUE

Chapter XII. *verses* 8-14.—" Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, all is vanity, and, further, because the Preacher was wise, he still taught the people. . . ."

I. Where does the Epilogue begin ?

(1) Cheyne contends that it begins at *v.* 9, with the saying that " Koheleth " was a wise man. " The last word of Ecclesiastes (before the Epilogue) is ' vanity of vanities, all is vanity,' which simply says that all Koheleth's wanderings had but brought him back to the point from which he started."

(2) But the Authorised Version with Plumptre, Wright, Ginsburg, Bradley, etc., regard the " saying," the " spirit shall return unto God who gave it," as the conclusion of the main body of the book, and " vanity of vanities, all is vanity," as the beginning of the Epilogue. All is *not* vanity if there is in human nature a real point of contact with God.

(3) Why then is this phrase used again ? The words, " vanity of vanities, all is vanity," only occur in this complete form in the Prologue of the book (i. 2), and therefore it is most natural that we should find them also at the beginning of the Epilogue, which puts them in their proper setting.

II. Is the Epilogue (chap. xii. 8-14) the work of the author of the book or the addition of an editorial hand ?

The arguments against the authorship of Ecclesiastes are mainly: (1) That this happy conclusion is inconsistent with the assertion that " all is vanity " ; that the book does not lead up to this conclusion ; that the same man could not have written dark things about man's destiny and the sadness of the world, and also expressed this orthodox faith.

(2) That Ecclesiastes speaks in the third person in

this Epilogue, whilst in the book itself he uses the first person.

(3) That an author would not commend his own work (*v.* 9).

(4) That the Epilogue occupies a place analogous to that of the close of St. John's Gospel (St. John xii. 24), and in the nature of a commendatory attestation justifying its admission into the Canon of Scripture and pointing out what is the true moral of its teaching (Plumptre).

Arguments for the Authorship of Ecclesiastes in the Epilogue

(1) These arguments have been summed up by Ginsburg, Delitzsch, Davidson, etc., in an exhaustive treatment of all objections. It may suffice to give the conclusion of Driver: "There does not appear to be any sufficient reason for doubting that chapter xii. 9 to 12 is by the author of the book . . . and the author himself may have appended the two closing verses with the same purpose in view as his supposed editor" (*Introduction to Old Testament*).

(2) The use of the third person in the Epilogue presents no difficulty, for, as Ginsburg says, "both the Prologue and the Epilogue are in the same third person, showing that they proceed from the same author."

(3) As for the author speaking about himself in the Epilogue, it is quite in keeping with his intention to drop the slight veil which he has assumed for a special purpose (the use of Solomon's name), and point out, in his own person, the character and bearing of the discussion in the book (Davison).

(4) Is there any need for a commendatory word from outside, either by a disciple of Ecclesiastes or by the Council of Jamnia, in order to admit it into the Canon? If the text of Ecclesiastes be allowed to stand as it is down to chap. xii. 7, it cannot be said that the Epilogue really adds anything to the doctrine of the book (Davison). Davidson goes so far as to say that there is no real conflict

between faith and doubt in the book at all (*Book by Book*).

(5) As for the assertion that the conclusion is inconsistent with the main thought of the book, these inconsistencies have been admitted and explained as due to contradictory moods of the author and the religious obscurity of the time. But Driver says: "While it is true that the Epilogue contains some unusual expressions, their general tone and strain are quite that of the book. If the two last verses stand on a different footing the thought is *implicit*, if not explicit elsewhere" (*Introduction*).

(6) Cheyne admits that it is impossible to give a conclusive refutation of the view (which he says he would like to believe true) that "Ecclesiastes" worked his way back to a living faith like Asaph (Psalm lxxiii.). There is no question (he says) that the book was admitted into the Canon on the assumption that he did (*Job and Solomon*, p. 250).

(7) It can easily be explained (says Wright) why an Epilogue was required. The author felt it necessary to say something in conclusion about himself and the manner in which he had composed his book; about the importance of the sacred writings in general and of his own book in particular; about the ultimate conclusion at which he had arrived.

(8) Delitzsch shows that the Epilogue is written quite in the same style as the book itself in language and idiom (see pp. 206-430). And Cheyne (quoting Delitzsch) admits that the Epilogue could not in any case have been added long after the period of the author himself. But Delitzsch cannot see any necessity for regarding the author of the Book and of the Epilogue as different persons. "The spirit and tone of the book and Epilogue are one. The Epilogue only seals the distinction between the pessimism of the book and the modern pessimism which is without God and without a future."

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